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EVERY . GOOD DEED



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THEY WERE SISTERS

THE PRIORY

GREENBANKS

THEY KNEW MR. KNIGHT

HIGH WAGES

ON APPROVAL and other Stories

AFTER TEA and other Stories



EVERY GOOD DEED

By
DOROTHY WHIPPLE



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CHAPTER I

THE Miss Tophams lived tranquilly at The Willows, a pleasant house left to them, with an adequate income, by their parents. Miss Susan took no part in public affairs. She managed the house and had a great admiration for Emily, her senior by two years, because she sat on Committees. Emily, on her part, had a great admiration for Susan and all she did in the house and garden. They frequently exchanged compliments.

"Your speech is reported, Emily," Susan would exclaim with excitement, opening the local paper. "And it reads so well. I don't know how you do it, dear."

"Your strawberry jam is delicious this year," Emily would say at tea. "It really tastes better than ever, Susan."

Of all her public affairs, Miss Emily enjoyed most her connection with the Children's Home. Though the sisters had never had anything to do with children, they loved them. Their only brother, James, who lived in London where he owned a chemical works, was married and had a daughter. But he did not come to see them or invite them to come to see him. He had a smart wife who could not be bothered with his sisters, and after the Miss Tophams had overheard themselves referred to as "mouldy" by James's wife, they were sensitive about forcing themselves upon James in any way. They wished they had been allowed to have some share in the little girl, Doreen, but it was not, they thought with resignation, to be. That was the way they usually accepted their disappointments. "Well, dear, it was not to be," one would say, and the other would agree that it evidently wasn't, and they would, like most of us, turn to something else and begin to hope about that.

The sisters were incurably benevolent. Miss Susan never

turned a beggar from the door and Miss Emily was constantly finding jobs for people who mostly didn't want them. The sisters were frequently taken in, as Cook did not fail to point out. When they were taken in, they admitted it with dignity, but pointed out to Cook, in their turn, that it was better to be taken in occasionally than to fail in an opportunity to help when help was really needed.

"I think we do more good than harm," Miss Emily would remark to Cook. "I think the balance is on the right side."

Whereupon Cook snorted, a habit Miss Susan found peculiarly exasperating. Cook had been with the Miss Tophams a long time. She was in her thirties and they were in their forties, but she felt they needed looking after for their own good and did not hesitate to advise and admonish them. Emily might have the infuriating ways of fellow-members of committee to put up with, but Susan had Cook. She felt the balance was pretty even, and when Emily brought home some tale about committee, Susan could generally cap it with one about Cook. But for all that there was a strong bond of affection and mutual respect between the three women at The Willows, and they were, on the whole, very comfortable.

Miss Emily was glad when she was elected to the chairmanship of the Children's Home because at last, she said to Susan, she would be able to do something for children. Susan said that here was a chance for her to do something for them too, and to Cook's indignation set about inviting the orphans in parties of a dozen to tea in the garden during the summer months. Miss Emily kept in close touch with the Children's Home, knew almost all that went on there and came in time to feel that it was practically hers. She met with no opposition from Matron, who was glad to shelter behind Miss Emily. Matron was not so young as she had been, but Emily felt vigorous enough to protect Matron or indeed anybody at all. Between them they

conspired to conceal from the Director of Education and the committee the fact that Matron was no longer quite up to her job. Matron's little weaknesses, dependencies and failures to manage only endeared her the more to Miss Emily.

Miss Emily very much enjoyed the meetings at the Home. She enjoyed sitting at the head of the table, with Matron beside her, discussing the Home business, at least most of it, with the committee, and she enjoyed it when, after the meeting, the other members dispersed, but she, by virtue of her position, went into Matron's room to have tea.

On a certain summer afternoon all had gone as usual, and Miss Emily was in Matron's room drinking tea and listening to several items of news that had not been brought up in committee.

"The Dobsons are back," said Matron with a sigh. Her face above her stiff collar was red from the heat and the nervous strain of committee. The Dobsons seemed an additional burden in this weather. "All five of them," she added. "The baby and all."

"Ah," said Miss Emily, pleased to be able to place the Dobsons so unerringly. "So the mother has gone off again?"

"Yes, with another man. And yet if you were to see her, Miss Topham, you'd think butter wouldn't melt in her mouth. She's one of those *quietly* bad women," said Matron. "They're always the worst."

Miss Emily, sitting by the open window in a flowered silk dress and mushroom hat wreathed with white roses, had no experience of bad women, quiet or otherwise, but she nodded as if she had plenty. Miss Emily cherished several delusions about herself. She imagined, for instance, that she knew all about the seamy side of life, all about children, that she was a woman of authority, very firm, a good manager of other people. The truth was that, like her sister, she was gentle and innocent, naïve and romantic.

Strange to say, she found the Children's Home romantic. Put up in the days when the authorities considered that any building intended for the use or education of children should be either punitive or ecclesiastical in appearance, the prison-like Home seemed romantic to Miss Emily. She felt a child-like, thrilling interest in the great bare rooms, stone floors, high barred windows, strong smell of carbolic, rows of hard beds covered with coarse red blankets, and above all in the fatherless, motherless or foundling children. She never admitted that she found it romantic, even to herself. Probably she didn't know. But her eyes, over the rim of her cup now, showed that the quiet badness of Mrs. Dobson and the return of her five children at intervals to the Home seemed more like a story to Miss Emily than actual sordid fact. When evidences of evil were presented to her, as they constantly were, she exclaimed over them in amazement; then they slid away into the past and she went on devoting herself to doing good.

"That Gwen Dobson's more of a handful every time she comes in," said Matron with another sigh. "Thank goodness she's thirteen now. Next time, she'll be too big to come here. But I've got her on my hands for the present and she's making trouble already. Are you coming round to-day, Miss Topham?" she asked as Miss Emily put down her empty cup. "Or is it too hot for you?"

"Dear me, no," said Emily, rising, with a smile. "It's never too hot for me to see the children."

"Well, they're out in the playground just now," said Matron. "But of course there are always the babies."

"Ah yes, the babies," said Miss Emily. "The best of all—the babies!"

Matron sighed as she led the way. It was well to be some people, she thought. !

The babies were having their supper, seated in little chairs at very low tables. Several small faces were hideously blotched with bluish-purple paint. Impetigo, Miss Emily

remembered, as she bent benevolently over them. Some were so shy they cried, others went on eating stolidly, until the nurses in charge made them all get up and sing a verse of some song about thanking God for everything, to show the Chairman that they could do it. Miss Emily stood smilingly by, but she wished the children had been allowed to get on with their supper. Everybody was relieved, including Miss Emily, when she went away.

All over the building, cleaners were busy getting the place ready for the next day. The sash windows were thrown up, chairs were piled on tables, floors were damp from scrubbing. The big rooms were empty except for one where a girl was standing by the high fire-guard before the empty grate. When she saw Matron, she made a dart for the opposite door, but Matron, with a temporary recovery of her one-time stentorian tones, shouted : " Gwen Dobson, come you here at once."

Miss Emily, who deplored Matron's shout—no one should shout at children—watched the approaching girl with benevolent interest. Surely Matron must be wrong about Gwen Dobson. This was a nice child ; a nice, fair, open face she had, with blue eyes. There couldn't be anything wrong about a child with a face like this. Faces never lie, thought Miss Emily, who had read it somewhere.

" Gwen Dobson, what are you doing in here ? " asked Matron, with what Miss Emily considered undue harshness. To soften it, Miss Emily laid her hand on the girl's head.

Under the hand, Gwen Dobson's face, which had been mutinous as she came up, assumed a meek expression. Miss Emily noticed the change and was delighted. " You see ? " she mutely pointed out to an invisible audience. " It's only a question of the right approach."

" What are you doing in here ? " repeated Matron.

" Nothing," murmured the girl with downcast eyes.

" Why aren't you out in the playground with the others ? " asked Matron.

The girl raised her blue eyes to Miss Emily's face. Gwen Dobson was said by unkind neighbours to be "sharp," by the kind to be "old-fashioned." That is, when she wanted anything she knew how to get it. At the moment she wanted to get out of trouble and here was someone with more authority than Matron. The thing to do, evidently, was to appeal to her. So she raised the blue eyes to Miss Emily and said with a childish quaver: "I were only thinking about my Mum."

It was true too. At this time of the day her mother often gave her a penny to keep out of the way, and with it Gwen went to the chip shop. Her stomach had turned from the Orphanage tea and now yearned for the customary chips and the giver of the penny that secured them. The words were prompted by her stomach and not her heart, but Miss Emily at once put the most pathetic construction on them and was sure that, bad though the mother was, the child must love her. She drew the girl to her side.

"Poor child," she said. "Don't be cross with her this time, Matron. Run back to the others now, dear, and try to play and enjoy yourself. It's all right this time, Matron, isn't it?"

"Well, it is if you say so, I suppose, Miss Topham. But don't you try it on again, Gwen Dobson, or it won't be."

The girl went slowly towards the door, but before going through it she turned and smiled wistfully at Miss Emily.

"Why, she's a sweet child, Matron," said Miss Emily, much moved. "Surely you don't find a child like that a handful? I'm sure I could manage her. Kindness is what she needs. You see how she responded."

"You don't know her, Miss Topham," said Matron wearily. She was tired of walking round the building she had walked round so many hundreds, nay, thousands of times already. She wanted to get into her room, shut the door and put her feet up. In this heat they swelled cruelly. She glanced down at them. Like bolsters they were and

looked as if they might burst the straps of her ward shoes at any moment. She wished Miss Topham would go.

At last Miss Topham did. She got into the car she had left at the gates and drove herself home through the hot streets. She had to incline the mushroom hat quite often as she went along. She was well known. She felt people respected and looked up to her and was grateful. She was altogether happy as she drove in at the gate of The Willows and put her car away.

The house was deliciously cool. In the drawing-room Susan was playing Chopin's Nocturne in E Flat. Emily would not go in lest Susan should stop. She stood in the hall to listen for a moment, taking off her gloves. Through one open door she could see the chintzes and flowers of the drawing-room, through another the table laid for dinner in the dining-room. From beyond the green-baize door at the back of the hall there came a faint but appetizing smell of cooking. As Emily went up to her own room she thought, gratefully again, what a happy life she lived with Susan and Cook and how lucky she was. As always when she felt this an urge came over her to pass some of it to other people.

By and by the gong went. Emily came downstairs, Susan left the piano. They dined together and afterwards walked round the garden, admiring the roses. Then they sat in the drawing-room, Susan sewing, Emily with the paper on her knee, discussing the details of their day. Susan heard about poor little Gwen Dobson, Emily heard about Cook. The evening went, if anything, even more pleasantly than usual.

It was about quarter-past ten when the telephone rang.

"Who can that be at this time of night?" exclaimed Susan.

Emily went to see.

"Is that you, Miss Topham?" enquired an agitated voice.

"Matron!" Miss Emily was startled. Her first thought

was fire. Fire at the Home. "What's wrong?" she asked sharply.

"It's this, Miss Topham," said Matron in a low hurried voice, as if she were afraid of being overheard. "I'm very sorry to trouble you, but I don't know what to do. I daren't ring up the Director, because it looks so bad, doesn't it, to be bested by a child? But I can't get Gwen Dobson out of the bathroom."

It took Miss Emily several seconds to wrench her mind from fire and bring it to Gwen Dobson.

"You can't get Gwen Dobson out of the bathroom?" she repeated in amazement.

"No, Miss Topham. She's locked herself in. She's been there since eight o'clock. She's got the one bathroom nobody can get at from outside. The caretaker's tried. He's had ladders up, but none of them's long enough. He's fallen off now and torn his trousers, so he won't try anything else. I'm at my wits' end, Miss Topham. It's been a long hot day and everybody wants to get to bed. They're all getting cross and expecting me to do something, and there's that bad girl singing at the top of her voice and banging on the bath with what sounds like the lid of the slop-pail. She's raising the neighbourhood, Miss Topham, and we'll have the police here soon. The Director won't like that. You know we're expected to manage."

The word "manage" was always a challenge to Miss Emily.

"I think I'd better come," she said. "Perhaps I shall be able to make her listen to reason." She felt secretly as if she were the voice of Reason itself. "I'll come straight away," she said.

"Oh, thank you, Miss Topham," said Matron fervently.

"Susan, dear," called Emily, putting down the telephone. "I'm going to the Home. Would you bring me my hat while I'm getting the car out? That poor child," she said as Susan appeared in the hall, "Gwen Dobson, you know,

has locked herself in a bathroom and they can't get her out. I think I shall be able to. What she needs is kindness. I saw it at once this afternoon. Just my hat, dear. I don't think I need gloves."

As soon as she stopped the engine of her car before the Home the din from the bathroom within fell on the quiet night. Miss Emily hurried in. Guided by the noise, she hurried upwards. By the time she was met by Matron in a white-tiled passage, neither could hear what the other said. At the end of the passage, women surged round a closed door like angry bees. One was beating on the wood with both fists, shouting: "My word, when I get at you, my lady . . ." when Miss Emily laid a hand on the strong bare arm. The woman, her hair in curlers for the night, turned. "That won't do," said Miss Emily, unheard, shaking her head. "No, no. That's not the way." Waving both hands gently back and forth, she shooed the women from the door. To their resentment she shooed them right down the passage and away. "I'd rather handle this affair alone," she explained, blinking in the harsh glare of the electric light. "Besides, this child must not be allowed to think she has created such a stir. Just leave it to me. I'll manage."

The women reluctantly dispersed, only to trickle back again, out of sight but not out of hearing, as soon as Miss Emily went back to the bathroom.

Miss Emily, kneeling on the wet floor—it began to look as if Gwen Dobson had also turned the taps on—put her mouth to the keyhole and waited. At the first pause in the banging and the singing, she said clearly: "Gwen dear."

The effect was all that she could desire. Silence fell.

"Gwen, this is Miss Topham. I'm alone outside the door. The others have all gone away. Won't you open the door, dear, and let me in?"

The banging was resumed with such violence that Miss

Emily clapped her hands to her ears. But she waited, and when the pause came again, said: "Gwen dear, come out and no one shall hurt you. You saw me this afternoon, you remember, and you know you can trust me. No one shall touch you. You shall just go to bed as if nothing had happened."

But that, evidently, wouldn't do. The banging started again. Miss Emily fell back on her heels. She waited.

"Gwen dear, what is it you want? Why are you doing this? Tell me what you want, dear."

The silence prolonged itself this time, and Miss Emily held her breath.

At last, speaking so close through the keyhole that Miss Emily started, a voice said: "I want to go home."

"But, dear," said Miss Emily, delighted to have reached a point where Reason could speak at last, "you haven't a home to go to."

The banging started again. Louder than ever. Miss Emily felt desperation rising within her. What if she couldn't get this child out of the bathroom after all?

In the next pause, the voice spoke of its own accord.

"I could go to the Wattseses. They'd have me."

"Who are the Wattses?" asked Miss Emily.

"They keep the pub," said Gwen.

"Oh, Gwen dear," said Miss Emily regretfully, "that won't do."

The banging began again. Miss Emily clasped the door-handle and leaned her forehead against it as if in prayer. The din was deafening. Far down the passage faces began to reappear. She turned and they scattered. But they reminded her that the situation must be coped with and quickly. She had said she would cope with it and cope with it she must. She rattled the door-handle. The noise ceased. Gwen paused to hear what she had to suggest this time.

"Gwen, you have no home to go to and you can't go to

a public house but—now wait a minute—” implored Miss Emily on a rising note, “if you will come out of this bathroom, you shall come straight home with me. Yes, I’ll take you home now in my car and you shall have supper and go to bed in a very pretty room with roses looking in at the window. No one shall touch you. I promise you, Gwen,” said Miss Emily with solemnity. “I give you my word.”

She waited with bated breath. If the girl rejected this offer, what on earth should she do? There would be nothing for it but to send for the Director and the police, and what a confession of failure that would be? And how unpleasant for poor Matron and for herself. And what would happen to the poor child? She might be sent to an Approved School. Miss Emily waited for what seemed a very long time.

On the other side of the door a key grated in the lock, two bolts were slowly moved back, the handle turned, the door opened and Gwen Dobson stood on the threshold, glowering under the mop of fair hair she had removed from the regulation plaits. “You promised,” she said warningly, ready with the door.

“I did, dear,” said Miss Emily, fervent with relief. “And I meant what I said. Take my hand.”

“Stand back, please,” she called out to the advancing horde of women. “I’m taking this child home with me for to-night. The whole incident can be discussed to-morrow. Let us pass, please. Matron, this is all right to you, isn’t it? I’ll come round first thing in the morning. Now go to bed, all of you. Good night, everybody, *good* night.”

She passed rapidly through the women, Gwen pressing closely behind her like a little truck behind an engine. Gwen’s eyes darted warily from side to side, to anticipate any blow that might be dealt at her. But the women dared only mutter their threats.

Before she disappeared round the corner, Gwen, clinging closely to Miss Emily's silken waist, turned and put out her tongue.

A gasp, almost a hiss, of anger and frustration, went up from the women.

"You wait, you monkey you," said one. "Wait till to-morrow."

BUT to-morrow, as far as Gwen's return to the Home was concerned, never came. She did not go back. At first, the situation was fluid. Nothing was settled. The sisters had not thought anything out. Emily had brought the girl to the house, and Susan was full of sympathy, and that was as far as things went at first. Gradually, however, the Miss Tophams were pushed into a position they afterwards thought it impossible to abandon.

To begin with, the Director of Education considered that Miss Emily had exceeded her authority in taking a child from the Orphanage without permission. The committee thought so too. Miss Emily was both hurt and piqued. She resigned her chairmanship. Matron eventually followed her into retirement. The new chairman soon came to the conclusion that Matron was past her job and said so. So the Home knew Miss Topham, Matron and Gwen no more, and all because Gwen had locked herself into the bathroom.

Gentle people are sometimes very obstinate, and the more opposition the Miss Tophams met with on the subject of keeping Gwen, the more obstinate they became. Several friends and neighbours called, inspected Gwen with curiosity, said that of course it was just like Miss Emily to act with such impulsive kindness, but they hoped the sisters wouldn't feel bound to keep the child for ever. After every such visit, the sisters redoubled their attentions to Gwen to make up to her for the adverse comments she hadn't heard.

But the most continual and violent opposition the sisters met with came from Cook.

"See where you've landed yourselves now," said Cook. "If you don't look out you're going to be saddled with her for good. And she's a sly piece. Anyone with half an eye

can see it. You're not the sort to deal with a girl like that. You're too soft, both of you. If that girl was the daughter of any of your friends, you'd see through her fast enough. But she's poor and comes from a bad home, so you're sure she must be nice," said Cook caustically.

"That will do, Cook," said Susan. "You may be sure that my sister and I will do what we consider best."

"Yes, but best who for? Not for yourselves, I'm warning you," said Cook.

"Now, Cook, we are quite capable of looking after ourselves," said Emily, coming into the kitchen.

"That's what you think," said Cook, with a snort that caused Susan to exchange glances with Emily.

With every day that passed, Gwen was more firmly entrenched at The Willows. Then James arrived and clinched the matter.

How James got wind of the situation the sisters did not really know, but they suspected Cook. Anyway, one afternoon when they came in from town whither they had taken Gwen to try on a new coat, there was James with Doreen in the drawing-room, with Cook making a flushed, triumphant exit.

Miss Emily, who could always deal with a situation within her own social orbit, dealt with this one.

"Ah, James," she said as coolly as if they had met yesterday. "It must be five years since we saw you. How are you? Is this Doreen? We shouldn't have known her, but that is not surprising."

James had considered his approach. He drew his daughter forward. She was a little older than Gwen and looked sulky, as if she hadn't wanted to come, which she hadn't.

"Kiss your aunts, my pet," said her father. "She's grown, hasn't she, Emily? Don't you think she's rather like you, Susan?"

"I see no resemblance," said Susan. "She's like her

mother, and I'm sure her mother would not be flattered to be thought like me."

"Doreen," said Emily. "This is Gwen, who has come to be *our* little girl now, you know."

So it was done. Cook, coming in with tea, stood stock-still in the doorway. James's hand, holding a cigarette, was arrested.

"The tea, please, Cook," said Miss Emily. "Where are you staying, James?"

Not here, her tone implied. She knew what he had come for. He had come to protest against their keeping Gwen, to prevent their spending money on her. He had come to protect his daughter's claim to his sisters' estate. He was always mercenary, reflected Miss Emily. But he had brought Doreen too late, and it was no concern of his what they did with their money, as she pointed out to him later when she had sent the children into the garden.

James made no headway with his sisters. They refused to alter their decision to keep Gwen, they refused even to discuss it. James was obliged to withdraw, which he did that evening, in a rage, leaving Cook, who had expected much from this visit, also in a rage.

And now that it was irrevocably settled that Gwen was to stay, the sisters had a serious consultation and prepared to admit changes in their lives. They were both secretly astonished to find how far-reaching these must be.

The first thing they decided was that Gwen could not at present be sent to school; that is, to a private school. They themselves had been to private schools and for them those were the only schools to go to. They must do for Gwen what had been done for them. But if Gwen were not to suffer at school, her speech and behaviour must be brought up to standard. Since Susan was occupied in the house and Cook was being very awkward, and since it was after all Emily who had brought Gwen to the house, Emily felt she must undertake to teach Gwen herself. Except for music,

which should be Susan's subject. So it was arranged that Susan should teach Gwen to play the piano in the drawing-room and that Emily should give up her public work, turn a bedroom into a schoolroom and establish herself there with Gwen for a fixed number of hours a day.

The preparations were interesting. Miss Emily thoroughly enjoyed her consultations with a headmistress of her acquaintance on the best course to follow in educating Gwen. She drew up an elaborate plan, to which she gave hours of study, but somehow when it came to the actual teaching, when she found herself shut up in the schoolroom with Gwen, things did not turn out as she had expected.

Gwen's attention was slippery ; in fact, it seemed unfixable. Miss Emily hoped, by changing the subject of the lesson often enough, that she would find and hold the pupil's interest somewhere, but there seemed no subject whatever in which Gwen was interested. The tales of Joan of Arc, of Richard the Lion Heart, of Warwick the King-maker that had so thrilled her sister and herself, left Gwen cold ; she didn't even mind that the little Princes were murdered in the Tower. The only English sovereign she could remember seemed to be Bloody Mary, and that, Miss Emily feared, only because the epithet was familiar. She didn't want to write nicely ; she didn't want to write at all. She didn't want to read, except "comics." Miss Emily barred these from the house, but somehow Gwen got hold of them, and Cook kept triumphantly bringing them out, as evidence of Gwen's slyness, from under her pillow or mattress or from down the sides of the armchairs.

It was not that Gwen was dull ; far from it. To further her own ends she was as sharp as a needle. She had a surprising memory for films she had seen, songs she had heard, and a lively imagination used mostly on making up tales about what had happened at the Children's Home or at her own home in Burns Street. She found that by relating these during lesson-times she could keep Miss

Emily from teaching her. Miss Emily had a theory that all these dark memories must be got out of Gwen's system by allowing her to talk about them. So while Gwen talked, Miss Emily, the Lady of Shallott suspended, listened with grave patience. Gwen embroidered and elaborated, seeing how long she could keep it up and how far she could go. She could generally go as far as she liked because the old girl, it appeared, would believe anything. Gwen despised her for it. When Miss Emily at last began on the lesson, Gwen began on her nails, which she bit, not absently, but with fierce interest. Miss Emily could not get on with the lesson for saying: "Don't do that, dear." "Gwen dear, what did I say?"

It was not long before Miss Emily was forced to admit to herself that she was not a good teacher. The discovery shocked and surprised her, because she had always felt sure she would be. "I wish I could have been a teacher," she used to say to teachers when she went round the schools in her public capacity. "I envy you, you know." And now she found she couldn't teach. It was another illusion gone, and Miss Emily did not feel quite the same without it.

What Emily was experiencing in the schoolroom, Susan was also experiencing below in the drawing-room. Music meant so much to Susan that she felt it her bounden duty, she explained to Emily, to teach the child in their care to lay hold of such happiness for herself. But Gwen seemed as impervious to music as she was to history or literature. She sat with a wooden expression, her eyes mostly wandering round the room as if her hands had nothing to do with her, while Miss Susan, enthusiastic, explanatory, arranged the fingers on the keys, pressing one here, one there. It seemed as if Gwen would never learn her notes, but Miss Susan persevered. With something amounting to torture to herself she persevered. Not only did she give Gwen a lesson three times a week but she sat with her twice a day while she practised, flinching from her stumblings and

discords. "Persevere, dear," she kept saying. "You will be so amply rewarded." Miss Susan had forgotten, she told Emily, that the beginnings of music were so painful ; painful for the teacher as well as the pupil, if not more so. Teachers of music ought to be paid twice or three times as much as they were, she said ; and they ought to be honoured as martyrs too. She finally resorted to bribery, and things went better after that. Gwen consented to learn, but not to enjoy. For the last ten minutes of the lesson, Miss Susan "rewarded" her pupil by playing to her herself ; to train her ear and to show what happiness lay in store for her. But while Susan played, Gwen lolled in a chair, her eyes on the garden, her face a blank, paying no attention whatever. It was very discouraging, thought Miss Susan, her hands falling from the keys.

In the schoolroom, Emily gave in to Gwen, in the drawing-room, Susan bribed her ; but they did not disclose their weaknesses to each other. They were ashamed, but felt helpless.

What both chiefly felt in dealing with Gwen was what they had never felt before ; uncertainty. They were uncertain how to proceed with the girl. They were baffled by being faced with a nature, a life, an experience so different from their own. They became more diffident, hesitant. Their friends noticed it : "That girl is too much for those sisters," they said to one another.

"We're too old for her," said the Miss Tophams. "She must have companions of her own age." They asked little girls in to play with her, but after running wild in Burns Street, mild play with the little girls was nothing in Gwen's line ; and nothing, it seemed, in the little girls' line either. For they didn't come twice, and they did not ask Gwen to their houses.

To add to their difficulties, the sisters found it impossible to reconcile Cook to the change in the household. Like cat and dog, Gwen and Cook were natural enemies. Every

time Cook crossed Gwen in the house, every time she came into the room with the pudding or the tea she sent a look at her as if to say : " My word, I'd chase you out of here if I'd my way," and Gwen slid her eyes about with a half-smile as if to reply : " Yes, but, you see, you daren't."

Gwen told tales about Cook, and Cook told tales about Gwen, and the puzzled sisters went from one to the other, not knowing what to believe. They appealed to Cook's better nature, but in vain. Cook said that as far as that brat was concerned she hadn't got one. " I've only got me sense," she said. " And that tells me she wants a good hiding, and my goodness, if she doesn't look out, she'll get it."

That was going too far, the sisters felt. It was presumption. They felt bound to speak to Cook about keeping her place. To mention place is always fatal, and matters came to a head. Cook gave notice.

" Yes, I'll go," she said. " She's ruined this house for me. I've served you faithfully for ten years and I'd have stood by you to the end, if you'd have seen sense, but you won't. So I'll go. It's like leaving a couple of canaries to the cat, but you've chosen. You've asked for what's coming to you," said Cook darkly.

The sisters accepted Cook's notice with outward dignity and inward misgiving. Would she really go? After all these years would she really leave them? She did. The day came when the out-porter carried away her yellow tin trunk and Cook, after making certain that she had left everything scrupulously clean, appeared in her red straw hat to say good-bye. They all wept then, three middle-aged women crying in the dining-room, with Gwen, lolling in a chair, chewing sweets, watching them.

Always making a fuss about something, was her comment to herself. She was glad the old bitch was going. She would be able to do as she liked now. There was nobody to stop her.

" I'll keep in touch with you," sobbed Cook as they took

her to the door. "I shan't cut myself off. If ever that girl goes, I'll come back. That is, if you want me."

"You need never have gone, Cook," said Miss Susan, wiping her eyes.

"Oh, yes, I need," said Cook. "It wouldn't have worked. Well, I'll say good afternoon. Good afternoon," said Cook, convulsed, and went.

The sisters were amazed at the chaos that followed. They hadn't been able to believe that Cook would really go and had made no attempt to replace her. Now, left with the work of the house, the cooking, the washing, they found themselves shockingly inadequate. Susan, who had always prided herself on her cooking, couldn't manage the kitchen range. Not only were the flues frightfully confusing, but she couldn't regulate the heat. Things that should have cooked slowly cooked fast, and vice versa. They sometimes had to wait hours for a meal to come to table; in fact, a fowl intended for lunch had to be eaten at supper. Late dinner was given up two days after Cook's departure.

Emily, always considered almost masculinely practical, couldn't even put the vacuum together. Neither could Susan. They had to get a man up from the shop. Washing-day was a nightmare. They rashly attempted the sheets, since Cook had always done them. But after drenching themselves to the skin in their attempts to transfer them from boiler to wringer, and after having been encoiled in their python-like folds for what seemed half a day, they murmured that next week it would be better to send them to the laundry.

They avoided each other's eyes; they were ashamed. If they could have laughed at themselves, it would have helped, but good and sweet-natured though they were, perhaps the Miss Tophams had a restricted sense of humour. Miss Susan had puckish flashes, but they weren't connected with wet sheets. Besides, they were too tired in these days to find anything funny.

Tired though they were, however, they never let themselves off. They toiled earnestly at whatever came their way. They persevered to the end. They saw things through. This was one of their outstanding qualities. Or it may have been a defect? Perhaps it is a bad thing not to know when to give up? Perhaps this is the key to the story of Gwen and the Miss Tophams.

When, after a time, they got maids, they either couldn't keep them or they didn't want to. Spoiled by Cook, they expected more than they were likely to get in these times. They were shocked at the change that had come over the girls since the day, ten years before, when they last engaged a maid. For some girls, the sisters were too exacting; with others, it was Gwen who complicated matters. Either they were a bad example to Gwen, or Gwen was a bad example to them. The sisters, anxious to be just, could not be sure which.

So that, more often than not, the Miss Tophams were without a maid, and the house and they themselves suffered in consequence. Never now did Miss Emily come in from interesting work in the outside world and stand in the hall to admire the flowers and listen to Susan playing Chopin in the drawing-room.

They tried to get Gwen to help in the house. Housework, they pointed out, provided the most useful lessons. But Gwen would never do it if she could avoid it; if she couldn't, she did it as badly as possible. If they put her in a room with a duster, she flicked over the tops of things, left the lower reaches undisturbed and spent the time, until called, lolling in a chair, sucking sweets. She had an inexhaustible cache of sweets, because the old softies never counted the money in their purses, or the change they left about. It was easy to extract a penny here and a penny there without arousing suspicion. In fact, you could sometimes "win" so much as sixpence, if you did it in two threepenny bits.

Gwen had ample opportunity of buying her sweets, because, although she avoided housework like the plague, she was always willing to run errands. She took Rover, the old Airedale, with her. The sisters were touched by her apparent affection for the old dog. But though she always took him with her, he often came home without her. Much later, Gwen would arrive, hot and breathless with looking for him, she said, giving a detailed account of all the streets she had searched through. "I know you don't like me to keep him on a lead too long, Aunt Emily. But when I let him off, I always seem to lose him, don't I?" she would say, opening her eyes in a way that would have been too wide for most people's confidence, but which seemed innocent to the sisters; as she meant it to.

She did not lose Rover often enough to rouse their suspicion. Other times when she was away too long, she came in with a lot of bright lies about the shops being full of people and the shopkeepers not giving her her rightful turn because she was only a little girl. "I told them it was for you, too," she would say, with the flattering implication that that really ought to have been enough for anybody.

The truth was that her mother was back and she kept making flying visits to Burns Street to treat her former friends to chips or ices according to the season, to look at the life she had no wish to return to but which still interested her more than any other, to show off, to give cheek and flash away before anyone could avenge it. Visits to Burns Street added excitement to her life with the Miss Tophams, and she was glad her mother had come back.

But it was a shock to her when, one wet afternoon, her mother paid a return visit to The Willows.

"Who's this?" asked Miss Emily, looking up from her chair in the window to see a bedraggled female figure coming in at the gate.

"Not a maid for interview, I hope," said Susan, who saw at a glance that she didn't want a maid like this.

An exclamation from Gwen made both sisters look at her. She had gone quite pale. "Who is it?" they asked. "D'you know her?"

"It's my Mum," said Gwen.

"Good gracious," said Miss Emily, going to the door.

Before Gwen could escape, her mother was in the room.

"Well, Gwen," said Mrs. Dobson, displaying a few broken teeth in a smile.

Gwen didn't say anything. She sidled against the sofa. The sisters thought it a strange meeting between mother and child separated for so long. They didn't know they had seen each other but yesterday.

"Sit down, Mrs. Dobson," said Miss Emily coldly, but putting a chair near the fire.

Mrs. Dobson had a fuzz of fair hair, a thin face and a furtive air. She reminded Susan of a ferret James once had. She didn't look directly at anything, but darted glances under her light lashes at the floor and the furniture. She wore a red mackintosh torn at the pockets. She could not, Miss Emily calculated, be much more than thirty.

"What is it you want, Mrs. Dobson?" asked Miss Emily, sitting very erect.

"Well, Miss, I came to say, after thinking it over, that it's about time our Gwen came home," said Mrs. Dobson, her eyes on the coal-box.

The silence that followed was shattered by a howl from the sofa. Gwen rushed at Susan and burst into tears.

"Don't let her take me. I won't go! I want to stay with you. Let me stay. Let me stay!"

The sisters were much moved. Gwen must be attached to them after all. Often enough they had feared she wasn't. Often they felt their pains were for nothing, she seemed so unresponsive and cold-hearted. But if she could cry like this at the threat of leaving them, and cling so passionately

to Susan, she must love them after all. Susan soothed her in her arms, and Emily went over to stroke her hair.

"Sh, dear, hush now. Go upstairs with Aunt Susan and leave me to manage things," said Emily comfortingly. "It will be all right, you'll see. Go along, dear, and don't upset yourself. Aunt Emily will look after you."

Susan took the sobbing girl away.

"Poor kid, she seems fond of you, I will admit," said Mrs. Dobson. "And no wonder, because I'm sure you're ever so kind to her. I said to myself as soon as I saw you, I said, she's kind, is this lady and your sister too. I say myself it would be a shame to take our Gwen from such a good home. You keep her beautiful, too, I must say. But she's my child, Miss, there's no getting away from that. It was me that brought her into the world and a cruel time I had. My health's never been the same since. You can ask anybody."

Miss Emily waited coldly, implying that she would not avail herself of this permission.

"My point's this," said Mrs. Dobson, warming to it. "If Gwen was at home with me now, she'd be earning. She'd be a help to me, would Gwen, because she's as sharp as all the rest put together. I've had a good job promised her. Usherette at the Palace picture house."

"Tch," said Miss Emily, in strong disapproval.

"Oh, it'd just suit Gwen. She always wanted a job like that. But what I want to know, if you'll excuse me, Miss, is why I should let you have my child and be out of pocket by it?"

"Do you wish us, then, to *buy* your daughter from you?" asked Miss Emily stiffly.

"Well, I shouldn't put it like that, Miss," said Mrs. Dobson, uninsulted. "But what I say is, our Gwen should come to her rightful mother and bring home good wages. Or if you want to keep her for her own good, you ought to compensate me."

Miss Emily had been out of touch for a long time with the Children's Home. She did not know that Mrs. Dobson had been refused the custody of her other children. The authorities had been forced to adopt them to keep them out of their mother's hands. Mrs. Dobson, who had questioned Gwen very thoroughly, was banking on Miss Emily's ignorance. She was successful. She went away with five pounds, and it was the first of many such sums.

Mrs. Dobson brought another dark element into the Miss Tophams' lives. It was not that the money mattered so much. They had more than enough money for their own needs. But their home was somehow breached now that Mrs. Dobson could arrive when she liked, as she often did, usually on a wet day. She chose the worst possible day to arrive on, partly because she was sure of finding them at home, partly because she could look more wretched. Mrs. Dobson, or indeed any poor person inadequately protected against the weather, could make the Miss Tophams feel guilty, as if they had no right to their comfortable surroundings ; though their father had worked hard enough all his life to provide them. The Miss Tophams were disturbed to see Mrs. Dobson come and relieved to see her go. They gave, and got rid of her for the time being. But it was as if, through their house now, ran a trickle from some dark source, which they couldn't turn off, but must submit to.

The Miss Tophams had none of the brisk acceptance of the born social worker ; it would have been better if they had. They were at the mercy of people like Mrs. Dobson and Gwen. They were hampered in any resistance they might have put up by delicacy of feeling and fear of hurting those who had not had what they called " the same chance."

CHAPTER III

IT was with a sense of achievement that the Miss Tophams saw Gwen off for her first day at Laurel Bank School for Girls. In spite of their inadequacies they had brought their task as far as this, and now they could pass Gwen on to hands more capable than theirs. At last she would develop on the right lines ; at last she would begin to benefit from what they had tried to do for her.

Standing together at the dining-room window, Emily and Susan watched her go. She was dressed like a schoolgirl, but somehow she didn't look like one. There was something about the swing of the short skirt over her plump thighs that brought a strange, unbidden thought to Susan's mind. "Too old for the chorus," she thought irrelevantly, and was surprised at herself. How could a child of fourteen and a half be too old for anything ?

"I didn't know we'd had that tunic made so short, Emily," she said. "I must let it down to-night."

"I hope she won't find it too strange at Laurel Bank," said Emily. "It's late for her to start there, isn't it ?"

Gwen disappeared from view, and the sisters turned from the window. They spoke of her often during the morning. "I keep wondering how she's getting on," said one or the other.

Although they had had every evidence to the contrary during the year that had elapsed since Gwen's arrival at The Willows, they pictured her as a sensitive, shrinking child this morning. Because the situation would have been difficult for them in Gwen's circumstances, they thought it must be difficult for Gwen. The Miss Tophams were continually reconstructing people in their own image. No matter how often other people proved themselves to be entirely different from the Miss Tophams, the Miss Tophams, though shaken,

sometimes considerably, at the moment of proving, obstinately started building them up again before long, sure that they must really be what they themselves were. Everybody was surely what they vaguely termed "all right underneath"? "Gwen is all right underneath," they kept telling each other throughout the difficult months that had passed. And now that she had gone to a school like Laurel Bank for the first time and might feel uncomfortable and at a loss, their hearts went out to her and they were sure, once more, that she was everything that could be wished for.

But Gwen was precisely what she had been hitherto. Tough, and pretty well equal to anything. She could adapt herself when she wished to. She didn't want to go to the school and would take care not to attend it oftener than she had to, but she knew, without having it pointed out as she frequently had by her mother, which side her bread was buttered. She might as well, she had decided, fall in with the old girls' ideas until she made up her mind what she wanted to do herself. So, pulling her hair well out from under her hat in front as soon as she was out of sight of the dining-room window, chewing sweets, eyeing the boys going in the opposite direction, Gwen went to school.

When she came home at the end of the afternoon—she stayed at school for the midday meal—the sisters had a special tea ready for her in the dining-room. They had not had tea as usual at four o'clock, but had waited to have it with Gwen, and now they all sat down together to a table spread with the things she liked best. A poached egg, because they were sure she must be hungry, jam and cream, scones, biscuits and an iced cake made by Susan, who, after dire experience, had now mastered the kitchen range. From their places at the ends of the table, the sisters kept leaning forward to push the laden plates a little nearer Gwen, anticipating her every want. They liked something to play at, thought Gwen, well, let 'em play. Suits me, she thought, eating.

After tea, they said she mustn't help with the washing-up. Not that she offered to, but they were sure she must be tired, and she also had homework to do. Miss Emily helped her with it. She was anxious that Gwen should not develop an inferiority complex by not being able to keep up with the others. She wrote to the headmistress to say she was sure it would be understood if she gave Gwen a little help with her lessons from time to time.

Now that Gwen was away all day, the sisters thought they might be able to get and keep a maid. They did, and things were better. Things seemed much better, and the sisters sailed ahead in blissful ignorance. Their experiment in adoption was going to turn out well, they were sure. When Cook, who had got herself a place nearby, called to see them, they told her that she had been wrong after all ; Gwen was developing very well. The next time Cook called she saw Gwen for herself and was almost persuaded that the Miss Tophams might be right, the girl's behaviour had improved so much. But Gwen was not really different ; only cleverer.

She had always been an adept at concealment, and now her scope was enlarged. She deceived at school now as well as at home. She acquired a mocking sparkle in the eye, due to getting the better of the people she lived with. She kept a nice balance ; she never overdid things. At school, she explained her absences by saying Aunt Emily wanted to take her to the dentist, or Aunt Susan had such a bad headache she did some errands for her, and so on. At home, she said Miss Parker had told her to stay at home because she had been sick in school. She was so ingenious and various in invention that neither party suspected her. She was considerably helped by the fact that the headmistress, Miss Parker, although she liked the Miss Tophams and took their protégé to please them, did not like Gwen and was subconsciously relieved when she was absent. The sisters, for their part, were convinced by Gwen that she

liked school so much she would never miss it unless she positively had to.

For week-end or evening absences from The Willows, Gwen invented a school friend at the other end of the town, a girl who couldn't come to tea because her mother was an invalid, but who often invited Gwen. She also invented tennis and other matches.

When she played truant, she went to Burns Street to see her mother or she went to the cinema. She always had money for the cinema, because what she didn't have given to her, she took.

After some months at Laurel Bank School, Gwen discovered the amenities of the Public Library. None of the girls seemed to have found out before this that the King's School boys went there to look things up in the Reference Room or wander round the shelves of the Lending Library choosing books. What could be more fun, asked Gwen, than wandering round the shelves too, or looking things up?

The boys, once they saw what the game was, joined in with zest. Enticement and pursuit went on round the shelves with much suppressed giggling, and guffawing. Notes were tossed over the desks in the Reference Room, meetings arranged and very little work done. At first, Gwen annexed most of the older boys, and other girls watched with awe and envy as she sauntered down the street with five or six boys in tow. The Library was in a fair way to becoming nothing but a rendezvous for adolescents, serious students were being driven away, the authorities were considering stern measures, when the nuisance suddenly abated. Either their mothers got wind of what was happening, or the girls of their own accord withdrew. They gave Gwen a wide berth, looking almost childishly frightened if she approached them. The boys began to cut her, more and more boys cut her. The Library, from having been the rage, began to be a place

nobody wanted to be seen in. Until, after some weeks, it resumed its normal place in their lives.

Gwen was not perturbed. She had found them all too young, the boys too young. She was older in experience than they were. She knew more. She forsook the Library, but began to go to the afternoon sessions at the Palais de Danse, or the first house at the Empire. She knew she was safe. No one who saw her was likely to be an acquaintance of the Miss Tophams, who had never set foot in either of these places in their lives.

Gwen's attitude towards the Miss Tophams was more and more the attitude of some men towards women. She looked upon them as creatures to be taken advantage of, deceived, humoured, played up to. Their principles were laughable, but she used them for her own ends. She had no scruples in taking all she could from them. "Well, they've got it," was the key-note of her conversations with her mother. And they liked lavishing things on her, and it didn't hurt anybody, so why not let 'em? The Miss Tophams were vaguely uneasy, but did not know why.

There were hundreds of children who, in the same circumstances, would have responded to their care, would have loved them and been grateful; but by mischance they had hit upon Gwen. They had not, however, come to any clear realization of this yet.

Gwen struck up a friendship with a programme-seller at the Empire, a vicious little girl known because of her platinum blonde hair as "Blondie." Blondie let Gwen in at the back of the variety theatre and introduced her to men performing there. The men came by the week and were always on the look-out for girls to pass the time with. Blondie and Gwen had a fine time going out with different men every week. With the aid of make-up and a dress Blondie kept for her at the Empire, Gwen transformed her appearance so effectively it is to be doubted that if the Miss Tophams had met her they would have known her.

She made herself look years older and always passed, with the men, for eighteen.

One day when Gwen came in from an afternoon out with Blondie and two negro singers who were in the bill at the Empire, she found that James had arrived with Doreen on one of his visits of reminder. He kept putting Doreen before his sisters, periodically presenting the claims of flesh and blood. But since Doreen was unwilling to be thus presented, she was usually sulky and did not show up well. She gave Gwen every chance to shine by comparison, and Gwen always took it.

Hastily washing her face—she had removed most of her make-up while changing her dress at the Empire—Gwen subdued her frizzy hair with a ribbon and appeared in the drawing-room. Greeting the visitors, she hastened to establish herself at Miss Susan's side to hand round tea. She was the picture of one used to helping, of one taking her rightful place as the daughter of the house. It looked to the visitors as if she must come in from school every day like this, and James wondered if it was really any use bothering any further.

When Gwen approached Doreen with the sandwiches, Doreen, hitherto silent, said suddenly: "What's that filthy scent you've got on?"

For a second, Gwen stood poised with the plate, her eyes sliding sideways.

"Oh, this?" she said, pulling out her handkerchief and proffering it to Doreen's nose, which was withdrawn in hauteur. "Don't you like it? A girl at school gave me a drop from a bottle she'd taken from her mother's drawer. Fancy, wasn't she awful?" she said, pressing her teeth on her lower lip in disapproval.

"The scent's awful," said Doreen tersely.

"I'll run and get another hanky if you don't like it," said Gwen, and with a bright, loving look at Miss Emily ran off.

She came back and sat on the sofa beside Doreen. .She set herself to entertain the unwilling guest. She prattled about Laurel Bank, giving such a convincing impersonation of an enthusiastic schoolgirl that the sisters almost bridled with pride. They kept exchanging glances of satisfaction.

They were grateful to her. They were grateful for any evidence that their adoption of her had not been altogether a failure. Whatever they knew about it themselves they didn't want James to know, and they were very grateful to Gwen for putting up a good show, at any rate when he was there.

Their feelings were complicated. They were not only glad that James should be taken in, they were very willing to be taken in themselves. They *wanted* to think that Gwen was a nice grateful girl, and on the slightest excuse they did think so. Relief and warmth invaded their hearts again and they were glad to have done, and be doing, what they did for her. They smiled, and the world seemed a brighter place when they were able to think that Gwen was a good girl after all.

But before long they were doubting again. Their hopes that school and education would do for Gwen what they had not been able to do began to ebb once more. There never seemed to be anything definite that they could pin their doubts to, but there was something going on that they could not define or understand. Over their books or their sewing, when they had time to sit down to them, they looked at Gwen as she chewed sweets and read her cheap papers. She grew bolder as she grew older, and brought the papers in openly now without any attempt to hide them. No mild hen hatching, say, a gosling or a turkey, could have been more amazed at what resulted from the egg than were the Miss Tophams at the development of the child they had taken from the Home. How had that small undernourished creature become this increasingly flam-

boyant young woman with over-developed figure, over-shaped legs and strong frizz of hair?

As they sat in the room with her, the sisters were uneasy, as if they were in the presence of something powerful and alien. As if she were waxing, waxing all the time, and they were waning. They had never waxed like this. Growth in them had been tranquil and imperceptible, but Gwen was pushing up like some coarse, quick-blooming plant.

Things had changed at The Willows. The house had lost its air of peace; its atmosphere was changed by a whiff of Gwen's scent, a coloured scarf thrown down, the sight of her thighs under her short skirts, her breasts under her tight jumpers. The clothes seemed decorous enough when they came from the shops, but as soon as Gwen put them on they took on some mysterious change.

When the headmistress of Laurel Bank School at last steeled herself sufficiently to call on the sisters to ask them to take Gwen away, they received her as if they had been expecting some such visit for a long time. Miss Parker, who liked and was sorry for the Miss Tophams, said apologetically that she thought she had done all she could now for Gwen and that no useful purpose could be served by her staying at the school any longer. Miss Parker knew she had not done anything for Gwen. She had put up with her for the sake of the Miss Tophams, but Gwen was one of those over-grown superannuated pupils who constitute a danger to their schoolfellows and a nuisance to their teachers. The sisters did not ask Miss Parker for any explanation. They accepted, they said, her decision.

Gwen, who saw Miss Parker arrive, waited upstairs with apprehension. She thought her activities at the Empire must have been discovered. She stood on the landing, biting her nails, trying to hear what they were saying below. Her mind darted about trying to find a way out. When she came down at last and was told gravely by the sisters that Miss Parker had asked them to remove her from the school,

she laughed aloud. What was there about being asked to leave a school that anyone need mind about? "Suits me," she said. "It was never anything in my line."

"We shall have to think of something for you to do after the holidays," said Miss Emily.

"Do?" said Gwen sharply.

"You will want something to do, won't you?" said Emily.

"Have a career of some sort? At your age, I was full of ambitions."

"They didn't come to much then, did they?" said Gwen. She looked at them angrily, her face red. She was outraged at being expected to do anything. Ladies didn't work. What was the use of them bringing her up to be a lady and then pitching her out to work? Her mother would be mad, and no wonder. She stood before the sisters, her eyes flashing rapidly from the floor to their faces and back again in a way she had when angry or disturbed. "I don't want to do anything," she said.

"There's plenty of time to think it over before September," said Emily calmly. "We thought you might like to take a secretarial course? Go to Sutton's College perhaps?"

"Oh, well," said Gwen mollified, seeing herself in an office with a lot of men. "I might do that."

In September, she allowed them to fit her out with new clothes, an attaché-case, a new fountain-pen and the necessary books, and to despatch her, with more waving from the dining-room window, with more hope, to Sutton's College. When she came home at the end of the day, they were full of interest and enquiries, but she wouldn't tell them much. Her policy was to keep them from nosing into her affairs at all.

"But do you think you'll *like* the work, dear?" persisted Miss Emily, anxious for a crumb of reassurance of some sort.

"Oh, I dare say," said Gwen. "It'll do, anyway."

It would do to be going on with. It kept the old girls

quiet and secured a continuance of comfort for herself while she pursued her own ends, went out with men from the Empire, giggled with Blondie, tapped idly on a typewriter, never exerted herself and lounged about the house when she was in it.

Then suddenly, she fell violently in love with the drummer in Percy Perryn's band. His name was Bern Johnson. He was pale, dark and handsome; his long lashes, waved hair and flapping bell-bottomed trousers all combined to infatuate Gwen beyond bearing. He seemed at first to prefer Blondie, and Gwen suffered agonies of love, hate and jealousy. She could neither sleep nor eat, and, unable to loll any more, ranged restlessly about the house, biting her nails. The sisters, much concerned, asked what was the matter.

"Oh, it's the exams at the College," said Gwen, almost brutal at having to bother to find excuses.

They begged her not to take them so seriously and brought her hot milk to bed. But when they sat on her eiderdown, diffidently hoping to invite confidences, she humped over to the wall and mumbled that she wanted to go to sleep.

She managed at last to get Bern from Blondie and roused his interest by telling him that she lived in a big house and was a rich girl really. Her aunts would have a fit if they knew she had ever set foot in the Empire, she said.

"Go on," said Bern. "I don't believe you."

"It's true," she said. "You walk home with me and I'll show you. I'll go in first and then you can walk past the house and I'll wave to you from my bedroom window. Only don't wave back. They might see you."

"Waving from a window doesn't prove anything," said Bern. "I bet you're the maid."

"The maid!" she gasped. "Me the maid? D'j'ever see a maid wearing shoes and stockings like these?" she said furiously, displaying her legs. "Or a wrist-watch like

that?" Tears of mortification sprang to her eyes. "Me the maid! I've a good mind to go home by myself."

She scrambled up from the grass, and he got up with her, amused. He took her home and walked past the house a few moments after she had gone in at the gate. She was in luck. Miss Susan was in the garden, and Gwen was able to prove she was not the maid by hanging in an inexplicable access of affection to Miss Susan's arm. She cast a triumphant glance at Bern as he passed, and a few moments later ran out after him to arrange, round the corner, a meeting for the morrow.

On the Sunday afternoon, after seeing Bern off at the station, Gwen's eyes were red from crying. The Miss Tophams, touched, anxious to comfort, tried to find out why.

"Oh, I've failed in the exams," she said, flinging away from them.

It was true. But even the trustful sisters could not believe that this accounted for the prolonged gloom that now fell upon Gwen. Sutton's College was closed for the holidays, and the Miss Tophams had to bear the unmitigated brunt of Gwen's almost savage melancholy. She did not go out as she used to, but mooned about the house, sighing heavily, biting her nails, looking at the sisters from under a neglected mop of hair as if she hated them and couldn't think why they should exist. She wouldn't get up in the mornings. Behind her locked door, she lay on her stomach, her face twisted sideways to gaze at the large close-up portrait of Bern that stood on the bed-table. "Enough to drive anybody mad," she said, through clenched teeth.

The photograph, showing in detail each stiffened eyelash, almost showing the tragacanth on each stiffened wave of his hair, stood under the girlish lamp-shade the sisters had given Gwen for Christmas, a coloured parchment whereon a lamb with a blue ribbon round its neck gambolled over daisies in the grass. The shade was symbolic of what the sisters thought Gwen, at seventeen, ought to be; the photo-

graph of what she actually was. During the day, when her door was open, the photograph of Bern was locked away in a drawer.

Gwen's gloom was trying, but her periods of activity at the piano were more trying still. At times, she would get up from the chair she had been lying in, push back her mop of hair and bang out Bern's tunes by the hour.

Susan rued the day she had taught Gwen to play. All the patient hours, the weeks, the months, the years, she had spent in teaching Gwen had come only to this. It was the same with everything they had taught her, thought Miss Susan. Every source of beauty they had opened to her ran dry in the sand of Gwen's nature. She turned all she knew to vulgar ends, mused Miss Susan bitterly.

The drawing-room was littered with songs about melancholy babies, dreams that wouldn't come true, waiting for you, being blue and one about how somebody called Johnny could love. The sisters sat trying to be broad-minded while Gwen sang, rolling her shoulders, throwing her eyes up to the ceiling. At last, when the song came to an end, Miss Susan could forbear no longer.

"And now could we have a little Chopin for a change?" she enquired.

"Oh, play it yourself," said Gwen, and, goaded by love and frustration, she got up and left them.

They didn't look at each other. "May I have the scissors, dear?" said Emily.

The sense of failure was heavy upon them. They ought to have been able to manage better than this. Some crisis of adolescence was going on and they didn't know what it was. Nor if they had known would they have been able to deal with it. They had come to realize that. Gwen was beyond them. To manage her, to help her, they would have had to be different themselves; and they weren't, and they couldn't be, now.

But perhaps no one could have done much with Gwen,

thought Miss Susan mutinously. Something about silk purses and sows' ears rose to her mind, but she daren't mention it. Emily would think it was dreadful of her. Emily never admitted that there were any sows' ears. It was all silk purses, according to Emily. Or had been, once.

CHAPTER IV

AT the end of the hot July afternoon the Miss Tophams, two tall, gentle-looking women in discreetly flowered silks, mushroom straw hats and long pale gloves, walked slowly along the tree-shaded road towards The Willows. They had been to a garden-party in aid of the N.S.P.C.C., and were tired. They were without maids again, and it had been a rush to get off after doing the work of the house, cooking lunch and clearing away. It was so hot, too, that they had been more inclined to rest in their own garden than to walk some distance to someone else's, where they would probably have to stand all the afternoon because, at these affairs, there were never enough deck-chairs to go round. After all, as Susan pointed out, struggling a little against Emily's sense of duty, since they had paid for their tickets and contributed to the cause, they had really no need to go. They had almost decided not to, but Gwen was persistent in persuasion that they should.

"I should go," she urged. "Be a change for you. Does you good to get out of the house sometimes. You go. I'll have supper ready for you when you come in."

She even offered to wash up, which was unprecedented.

Usually she did not care what they did, but to-day she had seen them out of the house with such determination that their suspicions were aroused. Turning at the door, Miss Emily said nervously: "You know, dear, you can always have your friends to the house. But we would rather you didn't have strangers—strange men, that is—when we are out."

"Oh, don't bother yourself," said Gwen airily, tea-towel in hand. "I don't want any men in."

From the corner, she watched them go down the drive. When about to turn the corner, they looked back and saw

that she was watching them from the gate. She flapped the tea-towel at them, not, thought Miss Susan, in farewell, but as if they were two flies she wanted to get rid of.

And now they were coming home. The garden-party had been very pleasant, but they had to stand all the time and they were tired. Coming home was not what it used to be. They didn't say anything, but in these days they shrank from coming back to Gwen.

They walked up the short drive, and Miss Emily turned the handle of the front door. It was locked. She turned to Susan in surprise. "She said she'd be in," she said.

"It's lucky I have a key," said Susan. "I don't usually carry one in this bag."

They went into the house. Gwen had said she would have supper ready, but there was no sign of it. She hadn't even finished the washing-up. Sighing, not because there was work to do, but because Gwen was always failing them, the Miss Tophams went slowly upstairs to take off their hats and put on their aprons. But passing Gwen's open door, Miss Emily, who was first, saw that the floor beyond it was strewn with papers and sundry oddments. With Susan behind her, she went into the room.

Chaos reigned; cupboard doors hung open showing empty shelves, drawers had been pulled out and the contents emptied—toffee-wrappers, lengths of greasy ribbon, old powder-puffs, hair-curlers, nail-files, empty bottles, showers of torn envelopes—all sorts of rubbish, and nothing but rubbish, littered the floor, the bed, the dressing-table. The sisters stared in amazement.

"She's run away," said Susan at last.

"She has," said Emily, and stepping through the dregs of Gwen's life at The Willows she took a sheet of paper from the dressing-table.

With Susan looking over her shoulder, she read Gwen's backward scrawl:

"I have gone away to get married. Don't try to find me and don't put the police on to me. It would spoil Bern's job and he'd never forgive me or you either. Besides, even if you did find me, I wouldn't come back and you couldn't make me. You never legally adopted me, so you've no rights over me, so don't try any funny business. I shall be married before you could find out where I am. Now don't try to find me, or I'll never forgive you. I'll never forgive you if you come between me and Bern."

The sisters looked at each other in silence. Then Susan turned and contemplated the rubbish on the floor. A smile dawned slowly on her face.

"Gone," she said. "She's actually gone." She looked as if she couldn't believe it, as if it must be far too good to be true.

"Emily!" she cried, turning back to her sister. "She's gone."

"What a letter!" said Emily.

Not a word of regret or gratitude after five years. Miss Emily was not so immediately concerned with the fact that Gwen had gone, but that she could write such a letter.

But Susan was already scooping up the rubbish on the floor. "I'm going to burn this," she said briskly.

Emily bent down and picked up an envelope hastily torn across. "What a lot of these envelopes there are," she said. "They must have been letters from the man—Bern, does she call him?"

She examined the postmarks. They were from many different provincial towns. "He must be a commercial traveller," said Susan. "Well, he's welcome to her."

"Susan, Susan," chided Miss Emily. "That's not quite the way to look at it."

"I know," admitted Susan, shovelling litter into the waste-paper basket. "But I don't care."

She moved briskly about, clearing up after Gwen. She

took the sheets from the bed, threw up the windows, brought the vacuum cleaner. Already it seemed to her that the house felt cool, different, itself. She went through the rooms, looking at them all, as if she hadn't seen them for a long time. The house, a friend, had been restored to her,

Emily wandered after her, temporarily disorientated. She had a guilty feeling that she ought to go off and look for Gwen, and a guiltier one that she didn't want to. But to marry at seventeen and a half! And what sort of a man? What sort of a life had she gone to?

"Nothing to do with us," said Susan firmly. "If she's married, she's married, and going after her wouldn't undo it."

"She's taken the money from the bureau-drawer," she called out later. "There was about seven pounds there."

"Well, I suppose she had to have some money," excused Miss Emily.

"Huh," said Susan. "I think you'll find she's emptied her bank account." Susan was right; she had.

The sisters at last remembered that they hadn't had supper, and set about boiling eggs. Anything would do to-night, they agreed. Half-way through the meal Susan got up and went into the drawing-room. The strains of the Nocturne in E Flat poured from the piano. When Emily came in, napkin in hand, to remind her of her egg, Susan got up and kissed her sister. "Isn't it nice to be alone together again?" she said, and returned to the kitchen.

Emily wondered how she should explain Gwen's absence, when discovered, to the neighbours, to the people in the road. But she had no need to worry. The neighbours knew almost as soon as the Miss Tophams; in fact, some of them knew, or guessed, before. They saw Gwen going away with her luggage in a taxi and hoped it was for good. The neighbours appeared to be delighted when this proved to be so. It seemed, from their nods and smiles, as if they with difficulty refrained from congratulating the Miss Tophams on their loss.

A few days later Emily met Susan coming out of the house with a letter for the pillar-box at the corner. "I've just been writing to Cook," she said, waving it aloft.

And as soon as she had served her notice, which she gladly did, because good mistresses are as rare as good maids and she had never found any like the Miss Tophams, Cook came back. She came back to her old room, which had been freshly painted and papered, to the view from the windows she was so fond of, to a tin of her favourite humbugs on the dressing-table with a card propped against it to say: "Welcome Home."

She came downstairs with red eyes and a watery smile.

"I'm glad I've got back in time for the bottling," she quavered to the sisters. "I've missed the straws and the rasps, I know, but there's the currants yet, and the plums and blackberries and apples. I'll not do so badly. Now, I'll have your tea ready in no time. You go and sit down. You can rest now."

Everything at The Willows was now as it had been before Gwen's advent, only better. Better, because of the contrast and because the occupants appreciated one another even more than of old. Separation, uncomfortable experience of others, had brought it home to them that they were eminently suited to one another.

The months went by, tranquil, happy, with never a word of Gwen to disturb them. A year went, one of the happiest years, they said to each other, that they had ever spent. They were so far restored to themselves that Susan was talking about "her" strawberry jam again, and Emily was seriously thinking of putting up once more for the Council.

Then, one wet summer afternoon, they looked up from where they sat at the open windows and saw a shabby, shapeless figure, carrying a suitcase, coming in at the gate. Their sewing falling from their fingers, the sisters saw that it was Gwen.

"And when do you expect your baby?" asked Miss Emily, much as if she were interviewing one of the girls at the Moral Welfare Centre.

She and Susan were determined not to be moved by the pitiable change in Gwen. They would do their best for her, they would see that she had everything she needed, but she could not come back. As soon as she was rested, they would make arrangements for her to go to a Nursing Home, and when the baby was born, they would settle her somewhere. But not at The Willows. They were firm about that.

"Oh, ten days to a fortnight," said Gwen, pushing back her hair.

Cook brought tea, looking daggers at Gwen, who did not look at her, but sat with her eyes on the newly lit fire, close-lipped, dirty, wet, and with a bad cold.

"And why didn't this man marry you?" asked Miss Emily stiffly.

"He's got a wife," said Gwen. "He doesn't live with her," she added, after a moment.

"Did you know that when you went to him, or with him?" pursued Miss Emily.

"No," said Gwen. "No, I didn't know."

It was the first thing he told her when she turned up at his rooms in Derby that night a year ago.

"But I've got a wife, I tell you. I'm married. Blast you, you'll get me the sack coming after me like this. What the hell do I want with you? I can get women wherever I go, can't I?"

But she managed him. She frightened him into helping to hide her by telling him what her rich people would do if they ever found him. He was weak and easily influenced, and she knew how to get her way. She lied and cajoled and stayed with him. But he had a wretched year, being

terrified of his wife, who had a dress shop in London, terrified of the police, terrified of the band-leader, who would not countenance trouble with women.

An offer to go abroad with another band for the summer came as a godsend to Bern. He decamped, leaving Gwen without a word or a penny. To get the money for the fare to The Willows, she pawned her last remaining article of value, her wrist-watch.

When Susan went upstairs to get the room ready for the unwelcome prodigal, Cook followed her.

"Miss Susan," she said. "That girl's further on than what she says. If you take my advice, you'll get her into a Nursing Home straight off."

"We will, Cook," said Susan heavily. "My sister will go round to Brooklands to-morrow."

But to-morrow wasn't soon enough. Gwen had reached The Willows just in time. After a night such as the Miss Tophams had never experienced, Gwen's child—a boy—was born towards ten o'clock the following morning.

Neighbours, the people in the road, looked up at the house as they went past. They stopped to tell one another the news. The poor Miss Tophams! Fancy that girl coming back and having a baby like that, they said. What brazen impudence!

But to the occupants of The Willows it no longer seemed any such thing. If Gwen had wished to reinstate herself, she could not have found a better way to do it than to come back and involve the three childless women in the pain, confusion and anxiety of birth. The Miss Tophams and Cook were shaken to the depths of their being by the events of the night, and by morning their attitude towards Gwen had quite changed.

As far as Cook was concerned, Gwen had found the one possible way to her sympathy; she had been badly treated by a man. And so, long ago, had Cook. In the

small hours of the strange night, she revealed this piece of information to the astonished sisters.

"But not like this?" faltered the horrified Susan. "I mean—you didn't have a baby, did you, Cook?"

"Miss Susan, I'm surprised at you," said Cook. "Certainly not. But I had my ring and dress and veil and everything—when he came and said he'd rather not go through with it. So I left home, and I've never been back. But it's all for the best. He was a proper cissy; he's living with his mother still. But I'd never trust a man again. I never liked that girl, so it's no use pretending I did, and I don't really think I ever could like her, but I feel for her now, I must say."

As for the sisters, it seemed to them that by such pain Gwen had atoned for everything. You couldn't suffer like that and remain the same, it seemed to them. "And the baby will make a new woman of her, you'll see," they told Cook.

When the baby was born at last, the Miss Tophams and Cook greeted him as if he were the long-hoped-for heir to their affections. They clean forgot that his father was a weakling, his mother a bad lot and himself a bastard. He was a baby, and none of them had ever had a baby at such close quarters before.

"I'd no idea new-born babies looked like this," said Susan with awe and delight as she washed the child. "Why, he's a person already. See the way he turns his head to look at us. We're the first things he has seen in his life, Emily."

"If he sees," said Emily, bending over the child on Susan's lap. "Which I doubt."

"I don't," said Susan stoutly. "He knows he's here. It's wonderful to produce life, Emily," she said, looking up wistfully at her sister.

"It's wonderful to preserve it too," said Emily, smiling down at Susan. "That baby might have died, but for us."

"He might indeed," said Susan, restored. She wrapped

the baby in the shawl she used to go to parties in when she was a child. "You know, I've never handled a baby before, Emily, and yet I feel quite used to doing it. I don't feel at all clumsy or nervous."

"You don't look it either," said Emily. "But all the same I must go and try again on the telephone for a nurse."

III

So life at The Willows underwent another change. The household now revolved round the baby. The Miss Tophams were as glad as any devoted young mother to see what Cook called "the back of the nurse," so that they could have the baby to themselves.

Gwen let them take charge. She let them play ; again, it suited her. "Having that kid fairly took it out of me," she told her mother, who promptly reappeared upon the scene.

"I don't know about that," said Mrs. Dobson, eyeing her daughter lying back on the frilled pillows with a tea-tray beside her. "Wherever you fall you manage to land on your feet. Trust you."

Gwen resented this, and a quarrel blew up like a sudden squall at sea.

"Don't let her up again," said Gwen to Miss Emily. "She upsets me."

Miss Emily was only too glad not to, and in protection more of the baby than of Gwen, paid Mrs. Dobson a considerable sum of money to keep away.

Gwen did not feed the baby herself. The Miss Tophams, taking it in turn, gave him his bottles. She didn't attempt to bath him. She said, making the sisters shudder, that she'd probably drop him or drown him. Besides, she said, she was too tired. She stayed in bed, or sat about, letting them bring her nourishing broths and Bengers, which the sisters did willingly, their reawakened benevolence overflowing from the baby to Gwen.

Exhaustion and depression had so subdued Gwen that she did indeed appear to be changed. But as the weeks went on, the sisters might have noticed that she was becoming, as people sometimes say, more like her old self; which in Gwen's case was not an improvement. The sisters, however, were too wrapped up in the baby to notice.

Gwen let them choose his name and take him to church to be christened. They called him Philip, after a brother who had died in infancy. They had always felt he would have been much nicer than James, had he lived. They bought a handsome perambulator and wheeled the baby out morning and afternoon, Cook sometimes taking her turn instead of going to the pictures.

The modern idea, they knew, was that the baby should spend the day in his pram in the garden, but Miss Emily said she was sure that the movement of the perambulator travelling over the pavements was a form of gentle exercise beneficial to his muscles, and Miss Susan heartily agreed, only too glad of an excuse to take him abroad and collect admiration from friends and neighbours. These came to hang over the pram at first from curiosity and love of scandal, but later, when they were used to the situation, they hung over from genuine interest in the baby and from a wish to please the Miss Tophams, who really were, everybody said, rather sweet.

James, who had not visited them during the year Gwen was away, now came again, without Doreen, to remonstrate with his sisters on harbouring that girl and her baby. But even Cook greeted him coldly, and when he used the word "bastard," the Miss Tophams requested him to leave at once and said they would rather not see him again.

The months passed. Philip throve and cut two teeth. Physically Gwen throve too. She put on weight, acquired another bank balance and many new clothes. But she was restless and dissatisfied and was out a great deal. It did not occur to the Miss Tophams that Gwen could be any-

thing but happy. She was a mother, and all mothers, according to their simple conception of such, were surely happy when their children were well? They were grateful to Gwen for letting them do so much for Philip, and when they very rarely noticed that time seemed to hang on her hands, they wondered guiltily if it was because they did too much for him, usurping a mother's place? But somehow when there was anything to be done, they did it as a matter of course, and did not notice that Gwen made no move to do it herself. Then they blamed themselves.

When Gwen said she would go and stay at Southend for a week or two at a boarding-house she knew of, the sisters accepted it as quite natural. Gwen was Philip's mother now; she was a mature woman. She must go away for a change if she wanted to. They were only too glad she didn't want to take Philip, who was cutting more teeth. He gave them a wakeful night before Gwen was due to leave in the morning. They were rather tired and worried at breakfast, and it was not until she was gone that they realized they hadn't got her address.

"Never mind," said Miss Emily. "She'll be writing."

But when the post-card came from Southend to say she had arrived, there was still no address on it.

"It's very careless of her," said Miss Emily. "How are we to let her know how Philip is?"

She could not imagine that anyone, least of all his mother, should not be concerned about Philip's new tooth.

When at length a letter came from Gwen, it was the very last kind of letter they expected. Gwen announced that she was not coming back.

"I've got a chance to go to America," she wrote. Bern would have been horrified to hear that she meant to go with him. Through his agent, she had tracked him down again. "So I'm going," she wrote. "You'll probably never hear of me again and I don't suppose you'll be sorry. I'm leaving Philip with you. You seem so fond of him it would

be a shame to deprive you. Besides, what should I do with a baby in America? I don't want him. You do. So we're both suited. You can adopt him legally. I'll give him to you. You can use this letter as proof that I give up my rights in him."

Miss Emily, gasping frequently, read aloud to Susan, who was holding Philip. She read in amazed sentences, stopping to read for herself what came next.

"Go on—Emily! Emily, don't stop like that—go on," urged Susan.

"That's all," said Emily, turning the single sheet over and seeing that there was positively no more to this amazing document.

"Give it to me," said Susan, reaching over the breakfast table. "Let me see it." Her eyes ran rapidly over Gwen's scrawl. "Well, I never heard anything like it," she said, dropping the letter to the table and staring at her sister. "She's gone again, and she gives us Philip. Look, Emily," she said, holding up Philip, rolled like a little cocoon in his shawl. "She'll give him up. His mother . . . this little, helpless, living creature. She'll hand him over. Well, Emily, all I can say is that she's an unnatural wretch, and I hope we never see her again. Never," said Susan vehemently, and getting up from her chair with Philip in her arms she went into the kitchen. "Cook," she said. "He's ours. His mother's gone, she's never coming back and she's given him to us. She never did a better day's work in her life because she's not fit to have him and she never shall. We'll see the lawyers this very morning."

CHAPTER V

FOR nineteen years the Miss Tophams were happy, and time passed almost imperceptibly at The Willows. The virginia creeper, once no bigger than the spread of a hand low down by the front porch, now covered all the house ; a bower of green every spring, a glory every autumn and a great nuisance when the leaves fell. Nowadays, Miss Susan let the gardener sweep them up. They employed a gardener now, and Cook had a young maid to help her, because they were all getting older. Every year the tall Miss Tophams were a little more bowed, their hair a little whiter ; every year Cook was a little stouter, and Philip taller and stronger.

Philip was a good-looking boy, with a clear pale skin, beautiful teeth and dark hair. If the Miss Tophams had ever seen the photograph that once stood under Gwen's bedside lamp, they would have been startled by the resemblance. But since they had never seen it, they were untroubled, and complacently considered that Philip was by far the handsomest boy in the district, as he had been the most beautiful baby.

He had left school and was doing the engineering course at the town's college of technology. The Miss Tophams and Cook adored him, but they tried very hard not to spoil him. They tried to profit from what they had learned in their treatment of his mother. They continually checked one another.

"Susan dear, no more money this week," Emily would say. "He'll never keep within his allowance if he knows he can come to you every time he overspends."

"Emily, you said he mustn't be out late again this week, but it was after midnight when he came in last night," said Susan.

"Cook, you really should not keep getting up these dress waistcoats yourself. You must send them to the laundry."

"They don't do them as well as me," said Cook. "And you know we all like to see him look nice."

It was painful to the Miss Tophams not to give Philip everything he wanted, but for his own good they rationed themselves in giving. He had everything suitable to his age as he grew; he had the best bicycles, the best bats, the best tennis rackets. He had at present the best motorcycle, but he must not have a car of his own until his twenty-first birthday, the Miss Tophams decreed. No, positively not until then. If they gave him a car before, there would be nothing left to give him on that great day. Besides, if he waited for a car, he would value it when he got it.

Philip liked the best. He would not pick up any old car for a few pounds as he might have done. He wanted one he didn't mind being seen about in, he said. As it was, he could drive any car or do any repairs to any car he came across.

In addition to this talent for motor-engineering, Philip had another. He played the piano, in his own particular way, with something amounting to brilliance. Miss Susan had had no unwilling pupil this time. He gave her no trouble. But she was dismayed and rather rueful when later he was seized with a passion for jazz and swing. She was still more dismayed and rather more rueful when she herself, and Emily too, caught the infection from Philip. When he began to play, they were drawn irresistibly to the drawing-room, and there they sat with their knitting, tapping their toes on the carpet, while Cook hummed in the kitchen. Philip played, with the most dazzling feats of technical execution, turning his handsome, laughing face towards them, egging them on, beating them up.

"His sense of rhythm is really remarkable," thought Miss Susan, proudly. "A very hot number," she said aloud, smiling as she turned her needles.

He got up and kissed her for that. "That's the style," he said. "I certainly keep you up to date, don't I?"

They smiled fondly. That was just what he did. He had drawn them into life, made them live. Their boy, their dear, dear boy, they thought, and longed for his twenty-first birthday so that they could give him the car.

Philip was very fond of his aunts and showed it. He had a gay, lovable nature. They thought he was perfect; and had no reason to think otherwise since he had not, so far, been put to the test in any way.

When he came in from tennis or football the Miss Tophams, elderly ladies now, sat beside him at the table, pushing first one plate towards him, then another; just as they had done for his mother, but with how much more love now on their side and affectionate acceptance on his.

It was as they sat thus at the table one warm summer evening that they heard the crunch of the gravel on the drive, and inclined stiffly backwards to look out of the window. Philip looked too.

"Who on earth is it?" he said laughing. "Looks like a trio of organ-grinders."

The Miss Tophams had no idea who they were. A bulky woman, a man in yellow shoes with something shady in the tilt of his hat, a young man, a boy of eighteen or so, bare-headed, with a bold reckless swagger.

Cook was out and the little maid had gone to the post. When Miss Emily got up from the table and crossed to the open window, the woman waved. She came towards the window, waving. "Coo-oo," she called.

Miss Emily stood where she was, staring. "She can't know us," she said. "Who is she?"

The woman had reached the window and now thrust her head and shoulders through it.

"Well?" she said. "Don't you know me? I'm Gwen," she said.

Susan got up so abruptly from the table that she took the cloth with her. Plates and glasses slid in an avalanche to the side, but no one noticed them. Susan stood staring. A feeling of danger, of apprehension had rushed over her, making her heart beat heavily, drying her mouth. Gwen, Philip's mother. Her thoughts flew up like disturbed bees. But Gwen couldn't touch Philip, she reassured herself. He was theirs. Everything was in order. Gwen could do no harm.

"You seem surprised to see me," said Gwen jauntily to the transfixed sisters. She leaned further into the room and looked past them. "Is that my boy at the table? My Philip—why . . ." she faltered, "he's the very spit and image . . ."

Miss Emily took a rapid step forward.

"What's up?" asked Gwen. "D'you mean to say he doesn't know I'm his mother?"

"He knows," said Miss Emily with dignity.

"That's all right then," said Gwen. "Perhaps you were bothered about Ken and Ronnie here? Well, there's no need. They know all about it too. No secrets in this family. But I forgot, you haven't met my husband and son yet, have you? I'll bring them in and introduce them. Is the door open, Aunt Emily? I remember you used to keep it on the catch, didn't you?"

Steps receded on the gravel. In the room, no one moved. Their eyes turned to the door, which in a moment opened to admit the intruders.

"Well, well, well," said Gwen, advancing into the room. "Funny to be back after all these years. And funniest of all is that big boy at the table." She went over to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "Well, ducks, what d'you think of your mother? Not much, judging from your face," she said with a hoarse laugh.

Philip stood up, partly from courtesy and partly, the Miss Tophams thought, to remove himself from her hand.

He looked as if he didn't know how to deal with the situation at all.

"Let these boys go out into the garden," said Miss Emily, sending them away from the scene as, years ago, she had sent Gwen and Doreen.

"Righty-ho," said Gwen. "Go on, Ronnie, with your brother."

At that word, Philip whipped round startled and looked at the other. Ronnie, his hands in his trouser pockets, his feet apart, met his eyes with amused equanimity. Then he jerked his head towards the garden door.

"Come on, old son," he said with rough sympathy. "You'll soon get used to the idea."

Philip's face cleared a little as he followed his newly sprung relation from the room.

"Sit down, Gwen," said Miss Emily when the boys were gone. "Sit here, Mr ——er?"

"Gordon's the name," said Gwen promptly.

A good Scots name, thought Miss Emily, but glancing at the man, she wondered. Was it his own?

"I'm married this time all right, Aunt Emily," said Gwen, exhibiting a thick gold ring embedded in the flesh of her third finger. "So don't be thinking otherwise. Been married nineteen years, haven't we, Ken? Ron's eighteen next month, isn't he?"

"That's right," said Ken, and coughed behind his hand as if to apologize for speaking. The two old ladies, the settled, sober, cultured atmosphere of the room seemed to upset him. From the yellowish whites of his eyes showing in his dark face, he looked as if he might bolt at any minute. His hands were thin, dirty, restless, the sort of hands, thought Miss Susan who had once been to the races, that would be good at the three-card trick.

"And why have you come here?" asked Miss Emily.

"Well, I like that," said Gwen with another of her hoarse laughs. "I came to see how you were all getting on. It's

natural, isn't it, that I should want to see my own son?"

"You've managed pretty well without seeing him for nineteen years," said Miss Emily. "And legally he isn't yours, you know. You can't take him away from us."

"I've no intention of trying," said Gwen. "So you can set your mind at rest."

That wasn't her game at all.

What her game was soon appeared. They had had a bad time. Ken had lost his job—unspecified. They decided to leave the London district in which they had been living, and though Ron had a good job as motor-salesman, second-hand cars, Great Portland Street, he threw it up to come away with his parents.

"They thought the world of Ron, didn't they, Ken? But he's always ready for something new. He'll pick up something here in no time. Trentham's not a bad place to make a living in," said Gwen. "There's always plenty going on, and it's not as if I was a stranger. After all, I was born here. It's only natural I should want to come back, isn't it?"

The Miss Tophams did not assent. Their minds were busy all the time, sifting what Gwen said to see where any threat to Philip might lie. Apart from anything else, and no matter how sweet-natured he was—and they knew he was that, he could not help but be shocked by the sudden appearance of such raffish relations. Years ago, the Miss Tophams had told him about his mother, but they had not imagined that he might some day be confronted by such a step-father and half-brother.

Suddenly, Gwen's tale was broken in upon by the urgent spitting of a motor-cycle. Miss Emily rose and went quickly to the window. The revelations of the evening must have been too much for poor Philip. He must be rushing away somewhere to escape from his brother.

But it was Ronald who was rushing out of the gate on

the motor-cycle while Philip, his hands in his pockets, stood smiling on the drive. At Miss Emily's exclamation the others came to stand at the window behind her.

"Is that Phil's bike?" asked Gwen. "Ron'll be trying it out."

She was right. In a few moments Ronald came flying back. He dismounted, and the young men stood laughing together, bending lovingly over the machine.

"Seem to have made friends," said Gwen with satisfaction. "Trust Ron to get round anybody. He's always like that, isn't he, Ken?"

"That's right," said Ken.

Afterwards, Miss Susan reflected that, throughout the evening, those were the only two words he said, though he said them several times.

By and by the boys came back into the house. Philip had evidently got over the immediate shock of finding that he had a mother and a brother.

"I've asked Ron in on Sunday," he said. "It's all right, isn't it?"

"We'll all come," said Gwen. "We don't think much to our rooms, do we, Ken?"

When at last they took their leave, the Miss Tophams went to their chairs and sat down. The evening had been too much for them. Their foreheads were damp, their hands trembled a little as they wiped their glasses. There was Cook to be told yet, and they must help Philip to readjust himself to this sudden acquisition of near relatives. But Philip seemed in no need of help. He walked up and down the room, restless, but not troubled. His chief reaction seemed to be that it was hard lines on Ronald as well as on him to have such a mother.

"Gosh, she's awful, isn't she? Yet I suppose she was quite good-looking once in her way. I wish she wouldn't wear that appalling hat. Do you suppose Ron, as she calls

him, is the son of that man, as she says, or the son of my own father, Aunt Emily ? ”

“ I have no idea, Philip,” said Miss Emily gravely. She didn’t quite understand how he could touch on these matters. But she could see he was taken with the idea of having a real brother. He had no wish to repudiate Ronald, whatever he felt about Gwen. It was really very sweet of him to be so devoid of snobbery. They must look at it like that, she thought. This was the fruit of their training. She ought to be proud, not uneasy, she told herself. His next remark showed their influence again.

“ I wish Ron could have grown up here with me,” he said. “ It’s tough luck on him that I should have had so much and he should have had nothing, isn’t it ? ”

“ He’s a decent chap, too,” he added after another turn round the room. “ What he doesn’t know about cars isn’t worth knowing.”

II

“ Always turning up, like a bad penny,” said Cook. “ Eh, I don’t know,” she sighed. “ We can’t seem to get rid of her. It was a bad day for us all when Miss Emily took her from that Home.”

“ But, Cook, without her we shouldn’t have had Philip,” said Susan. “ We mustn’t forget that when we are totalling things up.”

“ No,” agreed Cook. “ That’s true. Well, all we can hope is that she’ll go away again. She’s gone before. Let’s hope she’ll go again—and soon, too.”

But this time Gwen seemed to have no intention of going. She said it was time they settled. If only they had the money, she said, looking expectantly towards the Miss Tophams, they would buy a little business of some sort ; something they could put Ronald into, since jobs were not turning up, even for him, as they had expected. A little business in Swanley, she said, would be just the thing.

At that, for the first time, the Miss Tophams felt some relief. Swanley was a new housing estate ; it was not only respectable, it was a long way off, right across the city. The farther the better, felt the Miss Tophams, and for the first time displayed a faint, but promising interest in Gwen's plans.

Gwen saw at once that she had hit the right trail at last. She enlarged on the advantages of Swanley, but said it had one drawback ; it was so far away that they wouldn't be able to visit The Willows very often. But it was a good neighbourhood, and she was anxious that Ron should live in a nice part. Since she'd seen Philip again, she said she realized what poor Ron had missed. If only they had the money to buy a little business, say a greengrocer's or a stationer's, she said, they'd be set up for life. They'd never need to bother anybody again. Her eyes bright on Miss Emily, she waited.

"Have you looked about to see if there is a business for sale in Swanley?" asked Miss Emily.

"Oh, no," said Gwen. "Not much good looking out if you've no hope of buying, is it? I mean, I don't go looking in shop windows when I've no money in my pocket!" she said with one of her hoarse laughs.

"You'd better look for something then," said Miss Emily. "And we'll see what we can do."

"Well, that's ever so good of you, Auntie," said Gwen. "I'm sure we'd be ever so grateful, wouldn't we, Ken?"

"That's right," said Ken.

It was not long before Gwen reappeared at The Willows with news of a business in Swanley for sale ; a stationer's shop with a circulating library attached.

"I knew you'd be interested in that, Auntie," said Gwen brightly. "Books, you know. The man's just died. Bit of luck, isn't it? Spurr's the name. And the widow wants to sell. But we shall have to be quick, because there's several after it, and no wonder, it seems a little gold mine."

Ken made enquiries and dotted it all down, didn't you, Ken?"

"That's right," said Ken, bringing a wallet full of newspaper cuttings from his inside waistcoat pocket. With long, soiled fingers he selected a scrap of paper with figures scribbled over it.

The stationer's widow, it seemed, would sell for two thousand pounds.

"Two thousand pounds," repeated Miss Emily. She had not expected a small stationer's shop to cost so much. But she knew nothing about these things.

"I must think it over," she said.

"Certainly," said Gwen. "But you'll let us know fairly soon, won't you? As I say, there's others after it."

"I think I'd better see the place," said Miss Emily reluctantly. She didn't want to occupy herself with the affair, feeling inadequate to cope with it, but she must. She could not trust to Gwen's account and she would not consult the family lawyer. She knew the lawyer kept James informed of his sisters' affairs, so she never went near him unless obliged to. He certainly must not get wind of this project or James would reappear at The Willows. He had not been for years. Doreen might have competed with Gwen, but he knew she had no chance against Philip, so James gave up coming and contented himself by writing at Christmas or when some financial indiscretion of his sisters aroused him to protest.

She sighed at the thought of going into this affair of the stationer's shop, but could not part with such a sum without making sure that it was being given for a sound project. Given it would have to be. She knew they would never get any of it back; not from Gwen. She would not ask for or accept interest. There was nothing for it, if they decided to provide the money, but to give it outright. But she owed it to Susan and Philip to see that the money was properly spent.

Then, with a feeling of relief, she decided to let Philip handle the matter. He was old enough now to be the man of the family, and Gwen would never cheat her own son. Yes, Philip should manage everything. Except that she and Susan would just go and give the place what Philip called "the once-over." She smiled as she thought of that expression. Dear Philip, he was going to be such a comfort to them, such a help and stay in their old age. More and more they would be able to rely on him. It seemed almost too much, they were being altogether too much rewarded, that in addition to the happiness he had brought them as a child, he should be going to be such a comfort to them as a man. In adopting him they had meant to do the best for him, but they had, unconsciously, done the best for themselves too, thought Miss Emily, feeling almost guilty about it.

The sisters, taking four different buses to do it, went across the city to Swanley and back. The inconvenience and length of the journey did not annoy them in the least. It made them sure the indolent Gwen would not often make it. Spurr's shop, with a flat above, seemed a nice respectable place and looked flourishing. Having seen this, the Miss Tophams sat back and left the rest to Philip. All they did, though it was not the least important part, was to make out to Gwen a cheque which amounted in the end to a sum nearer three thousand than two. They felt relieved when they had done it; as if they had once more got rid of her. At least, she would have something to occupy her now and would not keep arriving at The Willows, rousing in the Miss Tophams and Cook the old feelings of uneasiness and apprehension.

The cheque seemed to work at once, too, because Gwen and her family seemed to drop completely out of the Miss Tophams' lives. No news whatever came from them. Winter had set in, and Philip always went to a good many dances and parties in the winter, so that the Miss Tophams

saw little of him. When they did see him, he didn't speak of the Gordons, and the Miss Tophams were only too glad to let sleeping dogs lie.

For a time. At first they congratulated themselves on Gwen's silence, but after several weeks had gone by, they grew uneasy.

"It's rather strange," said Susan. "That boy seemed so attached to Philip. Of course, it's all for the best, but it is rather strange, isn't it?"

It seemed increasingly strange, and at last the Miss Tophams decided to take a surreptitious journey to Swanley and have a look at the shop from across the road to see if Gwen had settled in properly. "And if we feel like it when we get there," said Miss Emily, "we'll just go in and ask how she's getting on. After all, it's perfectly natural."

They crossed the city to Swanley. There was such a sameness about the roads and houses of the estate that they found themselves considerably confused, but at last, from across the road, Miss Emily pointed her stick at the opposite corner.

"There's the shop," she said.

They stood, surveying it. "They haven't changed the name over the window," said Miss Susan. "It's still 'Spurr—Stationer.'"

"Perhaps they aren't going to," said Miss Emily. "Perhaps they think it best to keep the old name."

"They dress the window very well, don't they?" said Susan. "Quite as if they were used to it."

Miss Emily agreed. But at that moment a woman appeared at the door of the shop and stood there for a moment, looking out.

"Why, that's the woman we saw when we went over the place," said Emily. "That's Mrs. Spurr, the widow. Isn't it, Susan?"

"It is," said Susan. "Emily, what's the meaning of that?"

"I don't know," said Miss Emily. "Unless they've kept her on."

"Of course, they might have done that," said Susan.

"But I think we'd better go and see," said Emily.

They crossed the road and went into the shop. But for the woman behind the counter, it was empty.

"Good afternoon," said Miss Emily, bowing her head under the dangling magazines. "You're still here, Mrs. Spurr?"

The woman looked surprised. "Yes, I'm still here," she said with a laugh. "Why not?"

"I thought you were going to leave," said Miss Emily. "I thought you were going to sell the business."

"Oh, I changed my mind," said the woman. "I found I could manage, so I'm managing. But what's that to you, if you don't mind my asking?"

"Well," said Miss Emily, faltering a little, "some friends of mine thought of buying it, you know, and I came with them to look over the premises."

"I thought I'd seen you before," said the woman. "Those people—yes. No, I never heard from them again," she said.

A man came into the shop and she turned to serve him.

"Well, good afternoon," said Miss Emily, relieved to be able to escape.

"Good afternoon," called the woman indifferently.

"Susan," said Emily, clutching her sister's arm as they recrossed the road, "what can it mean?"

"She's cheated again," said Susan sternly. "That's what it is."

"But it's more than that," said Emily, her lips trembling. "What has Philip known about it all?"

"Philip!" exclaimed Susan. "Philip?" She halted on the pavement. "Philip can't have known anything about it. What do you mean?"

"I think he must have known they didn't buy the shop," said Emily.

The sisters looked into each other's eyes.

"Oh, no," said Susan. "He would have told us."

"I think he must have known," said Emily.

"Oh, Emily, don't say that. He couldn't have known. Come along, let's hurry home and talk to him. Don't suspect Philip like that. Why should you?"

"Because I think it is very strange he never spoke of them again. We had a reason for not speaking of them, but what reason had he—except that he didn't want to bring the subject up? Susan, I'm old. I see things too late. I feel very old this afternoon, Susan. I wish the bus would come so that we could sit down."

"It's coming," comforted Susan, holding her sister's arm. "We'll soon be home, and I know we'll find that Philip knew nothing whatever about it."

But Emily was right. Philip had known. He had known that his mother made no attempt to buy the stationer's shop, but had bought a share in a dance-hall in Lower Marsh instead.

"But I didn't know until they'd done it," he said, looking at the sisters across the table.

They looked at him in silence. Emily's hands trembled as she clasped them on the cloth. Susan had tears in her eyes.

"Why didn't you tell us? Didn't you think we had a right to know?" asked Miss Emily. Never had she thought she would have to speak in such a tone to him.

"Well, I knew it would only upset you," he said. "Besides, it was too late, what was the use?"

"But you couldn't expect it not to come out?" said Emily.

"I *wanted* it to come out," cried Philip. "I was hoping every day you'd get to know, but not from me. D'you think I've liked keeping it dark? I have not, let me tell you."

Very slightly, Miss Emily's face cleared. Susan laid a hand in appeal on her sister's arm.

"Besides, you know, Aunt Emily," reasoned Philip, leaning across the table earnestly. "You'd given them the money. We really ought to let people earn their living in the way that suits them best. What would my mother and Ken do in a bookshop? And Ron? It was absurd, wasn't it? Ken knows all about dance-halls. He's run one before, it seems. They'll make far more money and be far happier where they are, than in that shop."

"In Lower Marsh?" said Emily. "A district like that?"

"Oh, it's not so bad," said Philip. "In fact they've made it into a very nice hall."

Miss Emily's face clouded again.

"So you've been there?" she said.

"Well, yes, I have."

They looked at each other, Philip's dark eyes on his aunt.

"As a matter of fact," he said, his face breaking into a smile in spite of himself, "I've been playing in the band."

"Playing in the band?" said Miss Emily aghast.

Philip got up and flung himself round the table to throw his arms round her.

"Oh, I couldn't resist it," he said. "Don't look like that, Aunt Emily, I can't stand it. Don't be cross, darling. Think of it—there was that gorgeous piano and a complete band. It was such a chance and they were so decent. They practised with me no end, and the regular pianist went off on his holiday and left it to me. I've had the time of my life. Don't spoil it, Aunt Emily. Don't! And I say, you and Aunt Susan must come and watch me playing. You must. Oh, don't be narrow-minded, darling. Don't be a spoil-sport. What's wrong with a dance-hall? There are thousands of them. Young people will dance, you know, you can't stop 'em, and they might as well dance in a respectable place while they're at it, and this

is, I promise you. You must come and see. They're dying for you to see it."

And, surprisingly, they went. He talked them round, though it took time. Miss Emily was badly shaken by the incident. She felt that Philip's behaviour had been secretive and somehow devious. Anyway, it wasn't what she would have *liked* him to do, she said to Susan. Cook, too, when they told her—they always told her everything—took it as seriously as Emily. She shook her head over it. She saw his mother's hand in it. It didn't sound like their boy, she said. From this day she added a petition to the prayers she said every night, kneeling by her high bed. "Please God," she prayed, "don't let him be like his mother."

But Susan tried to persuade them that it was really nothing. He hadn't known until too late, and then, boy-like, he had been so very tempted to play in the band. They mustn't blame him, he was so young. And Emily had given him too much responsibility. How could a boy control a sharp, experienced woman like Gwen? It was too much to expect altogether. They must forget about it, and they must go to the dance-hall as he wanted them to. They must keep up with him, keep along with him, said Susan. It was much safer that way. If they didn't, they might lose him altogether, being old as they were, and dull company for him.

In the end, she got her way. They went to the dance-hall. They donned their "semi-evening" dresses of black moiré silk, the ones that Philip liked best. Each wore a black velvet ribbon round her throat to conceal, a little, the ravages of time. Susan actually put a star of dim diamonds in her hair. They took floating ninon scarves to throw round their shoulders if the place should be draughty—and filled with trepidation and excitement, they took a taxi to the hall.

"This is something very new for us, Susan," said Miss

Emily, as they walked over the soundless rubber carpet of the foyer.

"It is indeed, dear," said Susan, her eyes going past her sister to the dance-floor beyond.

It was clear for the moment. The dancers had drifted from the floor when the band stopped and were now crowded against the walls, or seated, the lucky ones, at the small tables scattered under the balcony. There seemed to be an immense number of young men and girls, all very noisy. The Miss Tophams stood at the entrance peering in, much to the amusement of the young people about them.

"See what's come!" said one. "Mike and Joe—two partners looking for you! Go and ask them for the rumba."

At the far end of the room, on a low dais, the Miss Tophams saw Philip at the piano, his back for the moment towards them. "Let's go across to him," said Miss Emily, and would have started had not Susan laid a hand on her arm. "Perhaps he wouldn't like it," she said.

Then they saw Gwen coming across the floor towards them. They waited for her, concealing their astonishment, she looked so unfamiliar. She wore a long tight black dress with a glittering design of sequins climbing up the front. The design was so bold and brilliant that from a distance you couldn't see the woman behind it. She looked like a tree walking, thought Miss Susan. Like a palm with the leaves heaved by an ample bosom. Her bleached hair was piled immensely high. Her mouth was shaped into a strong, orange-coloured cupid's bow and her lashes were balled with mascara.

But she looked completely at home, completely mistress of herself and the place.

"Nice of you to come, Aunties," she said, reaching them. "Come this way. I've kept a table for you."

She led the way to a table under the balcony and pulled out the small gilt chairs for them. "You be all right

there?" she enquired. "I'll send a waitress later. Order what you like. It's on the house to-night."

The Miss Tophams had no idea what that meant, but they thanked her. Miss Emily had intended to tell Gwen what she thought of her misuse of the money. Over and over again she had rehearsed what she would say, but she felt it was not the moment. She sat at the table, arranging her scarf, looking at Philip, who was chatting with the band, looking at Ken, who, his face sallow above his dress shirt, was gliding among the tables diffusing an air of stealth and wrong-doing, though in all probability, thought Miss Susan, he was only asking them if they would take tea or coffee.

Gwen stood beside the table. She hadn't time to sit down, she said, she must be off in a minute.

"D'you know who we've got in the bar?" she said, amused. "We've got Blondie."

She saw that it conveyed nothing to them.

"Oh, I forgot," she said, laughing at herself. "You never knew Blondie, did you? She was a friend of mine in the old days. She was at the Empire. Introduced me to Bern, as a matter of fact. My God, you should see her now! Enough to turn the milk sour. But I chose her on purpose. Because of the boys. She's no temptation, isn't Blondie. Not now. Phil and Ron'll be safe with her, you don't need to worry."

In spite of this reassurance, the Miss Tophams looked troubled. They had not thought to reckon with a bar and a woman behind it, in addition to the dance-hall, for Philip. It was another disturbing idea to assimilate. But before the process could do more than begin, the band struck up and the dancers crowded out on to the floor.

The Miss Tophams leaned forward. They had come to watch Philip play, and for them, now, the evening had begun. But the dancers were a nuisance. They obscured the view. Miss Emily waved her hand as if she would brush them

from the floor. Miss Susan craned over their heads. "I can't see him properly," she complained.

"Half a mo'," said Gwen indulgently. "You will."

Gwen was in an amiable mood. Everything was going her way. The place was crowded. Philip was a draw, the girls were mad about him, and Gwen enjoyed saying: "That's my son at the piano." It made a sensation, and everybody made up to her, hoping for an introduction. It was something of a triumph, too, to get the old girls in, and though they looked a scream, really, with their black velvet neck-bands and starchy ways among the boys and girls, they somehow gave a bit of tone to the place, and Gwen wasn't sorry to be overheard calling them "Auntie." And nothing had been said about the money. It was all passing off very well, and Gwen was pleased with herself.

The hall grew dim and a spotlight picked out Philip at the piano. There he was, dashing music from the keys like brilliant water-drops, playing with incredible speed and verve, laughing up into the light, having the time of his life and looking so handsome, young and altogether irresistible, the Miss Tophams thought, that tears came into their eyes and they watched him through a blur.

"It takes me back," said Gwen, standing above them, her arms crossed over the sequins. "Many's the time I've seen his father look just like that. You don't wonder I fell for him, do you?"

Miss Susan looked up. Gwen, in her good humour, was inclined to be communicative.

"He died, you know, did Bern," she said. "Yes, died in America about six weeks after we got there. Scarlet fever."

"He was only twenty-five," she said. She poked a finger here and there into her pompadour and scratched her scalp. "What's that, Ken? You want me? Righty-ho. Well, you'll be all right, won't you?", she said to the Miss Tophams. "I'll send a waitress along. Not a bad place, is it?"

She smiled a hostess smile, and without waiting for an answer walked away between the tables, trailing her hand proprietorially over the back of the gilt chairs as she went.

With a crash of chords, Philip's playing ceased, and, running the gauntlet of unbridled applause, he came sliding over the floor to his aunts. He threw himself into a chair and mopped his brow. "Phew," he said.

"That was splendid, dear," they said. "You surpassed yourself."

"It was all right, was it?" he said. "Oh, Phyllis, bring me a large Lager. I could drink a well dry," he said to the waitress. "And tea for my aunts. China, if you've got it."

A large semicircle of girls was crowding slowly nearer, like calves approaching an object of curiosity or fascination in a field, thought Miss Susan.

"No autographs to-night," cried Philip, waving a hand at them. "Let me off. I'm otherwise engaged."

Laughing, he picked up his chair and sat down again with his back to them.

"It's beyond a joke," he said. "Ah—my beer! And your tea. Well, what do you think of it all? Eh?"

The Miss Tophams looked at the girls, all eyes on Philip.

"It's most interesting, dear," said Miss Emily, blinking anxiously. "Most interesting."

"Where's the boy?" asked Miss Susan. "Where's Ronald?"

"Isn't he about?" asked Philip. He looked round, and smiles rippled over the admiring semicircle. "He slips out, the beggar. There's a car-park behind the County Club. He knows the man at the gate, so he takes his girl and spends a comfortable evening in a Rolls-Royce now and again."

He laughed and drained his glass. He was excited at his own performance and the girls at his back, or he would not have spoken so freely.

"Phyllis," he called. "Another Lager. Don't be shocked, Aunt Emily. It wouldn't hurt a fly."

Victorian parents, foster or otherwise, had an easier task. Black was black, white white in those days, right was right and wrong wrong; there were no half shades to confuse. The Victorian elders could lay down the law in these matters, and the young, mostly, took their word for it.

But nowadays it is different. The Miss Tophams were modern in that they were apologetic about what they thought to be right and diffident in condemning what they felt to be wrong, in case it wasn't.

The conversation that took place in Miss Emily's bedroom that night, over the glasses of hot water they always drank on retiring, might have amused a sophisticated listener.

"I don't suppose, Emily," ventured Susan, sipping the hot water, "that there's anything actually wrong in playing in a band?"

"There isn't," said Emily, also sipping. "All boys nowadays seem to want to play in a band, or have a band at home, just as they want to fly or drive fast cars. Speed, noise and danger, preferably combined, are what they want, and if they can't have them altogether, they'll take them singly."

"Well then?" said Susan, who wished very much to let Philip do as he wanted, but feared for him if he did.

"Don't you think we ought to let him?" she said, since Emily did not speak.

"My dear, we can't stop him," said Miss Emily rather grimly. "What can two old women do against youth, high spirits, excitement and novelty? What chance have we?"

They pondered on this, Emily sitting on the bed, Susan in a chair.

"Lager's very light, dear," said Susan, beginning again. "I had it once in Switzerland, I remember, and I didn't feel the slightest ill effects."

"Oh, we've no need to fear Lager," said Miss Emily, still without saying what it was they had need to fear.

"There are so many different kinds of lives and so many different kinds of people and natures, aren't there?" said Susan, trying to figure things out. "I suppose even Gwen has her good points."

"She probably has," admitted Emily. "For one thing, she's not timid, and we are, rather. She's not bound by comfort or ease, as we are. She broke away from them and went to much worse conditions. She went half-way across the world after a man. He didn't want her, but she went."

The sisters sat in silence for a moment.

"But we can't trust her," Emily broke out again. "And we don't want Philip to be mixed up with her. Yet I hesitate, you know, to try to prevent Philip from seeing his own people. It doesn't seem to be quite the kind thing to do, does it? Besides, if we did try to prevent him I don't suppose we should succeed."

"He seems to be quite taken up with that brother of his," said Susan. "I didn't like to hear he was sitting out with a girl in someone else's Rolls-Royce, did you?"

"No, but I liked even less that Philip should think it was funny," said Miss Emily.

"And yet I don't suppose there's anything actually wrong in sitting out in someone else's car?" puzzled Miss Susan.

"I don't suppose there is," admitted Miss Emily. "I don't know why we think so badly of it."

"Well, dear, I think we'd better go to bed," she said. "I don't suppose we shall get anywhere, with all our talking. We can only pray for our boy and do our best."

"Good night, dear," said Susan, kissing her sister's insubstantial cheek. "I don't know what I should do without you. You know so much more than I do."

"Don't say that," said Miss Emily, shocked. "I've just lived long enough to know I know nothing at all."

G WEN'S Ronald seemed to have the same faculty of upsetting the atmosphere of The Willows as his mother before him. When he arrived, which was often, confusion came with him. Philip hailed him with joy and took him up to his room, which the Miss Tophams had fondly furnished as a bed-sitting-room so that he should have a place entirely to himself.

As soon as the boys got upstairs the house was filled with a blare of noise from Philip's wireless set, with the sound of the bath taps turned on full, with the amazing bumpings and thumpings that accompanied the bathing and changing that followed. Ronald used Philip's shirts, socks, shoes, suits as if they were his own ; to Cook's extreme annoyance.

The Miss Tophams sat below in a state of agitation. They said it was the loud throb of the music that upset them, but it was probably because Philip had a cupboard full of sherry, gin and vermouth upstairs, bought with his earnings at the dance-hall and at Fell and Brownings, the engineers, where he now worked. He was boyishly proud of his cocktail cabinet, arranging and rearranging it like a little girl playing with a doll's house. But the Miss Tophams looked upon its contents as dangerous stuff, especially in Ronald's company.

By and by the boys came bounding down to raid the pantry, eating largely of anything they could lay their hands on. Then with a hug for each aunt—bent on haste and pleasure though he was, he kept his charming, affectionate ways—Philip mounted his motor-cycle and, with Ronald pillion behind him, rushed off, leaving the Miss Tophams in anxious ignorance as to where he had gone and when he would be back, and Cook full of dark conjecture.

"That Ronald's his mother's son," she said. "He'll get our boy into trouble before long."

"But Philip shouldn't be so easily led," said Miss Emily. "Though I know boys will be boys," she added, trying to be reasonable. "This stage will pass. I'm sure Philip's all right underneath."

They would go upstairs, then, the three of them; Emily and Susan to put Philip's room to rights while Cook mopped up the bathroom. But the next morning, if Ronald had come back with Philip as he often did, to sleep on the sofa, it was all to do again. "I've never seen anyone make such a mess," complained Cook. "I don't know what our boy sees in him."

If it had been any other friend of Philip's, the Miss Tophams would have taken a fond pride in the noise and upset. They always had until now. But Philip had deserted his former friends. Ronald had become his sole companion and the dance-hall his chief interest. And the Miss Tophams distrusted Ronald almost as much as they distrusted his mother.

"It's as if he doubles Philip's own weaknesses," said Susan suddenly, having worked it out. "We've tried to bring Philip up with a better sense of values, and then at a crucial age his mother and brother come to reinforce the characteristics he probably has in common with them."

"I think that's what it is," said Miss Emily wearily.

They were worried. Philip was not taking well to the work he had once looked forward to. He came down late in the mornings looking tired and even, the Miss Tophams feared, dissipated after his night at the dance-hall. When Miss Emily inferred that he might lose his job if he didn't attend to it better, he said it wouldn't matter.

"I can earn five times as much in a professional band, or on the halls," he said, horrifying them.

They feared limelight was getting into his blood; he never wanted to be out of it. He wanted more and better limelight.

Then he worried them still further by losing his appetite,

by looking even worse when he came down in the mornings, by being silent and forgetting to hug them before he went out. Many a time they might not have been there at all, they felt. They decided to go and see Gwen and insist that she should not employ him any more.

Gwen lived in the flat over the dance-hall, and when the Miss Tophams, passing through the shrouded ballroom which smelled stale, rang the bell at the foot of a stair, Ken opened the door, cautiously as he did everything, and looked down at them. Sallow, collarless, unshaven, a cigarette stuck to his lip, he motioned to them to come up, called to his wife and glided away. He scented trouble, and his instinct was always to avoid it.

In the sitting-room, Gwen lay before a hot fire on a short sofa with high ends. She looked like a woman in a bucket, with her head, her back hair dangling in tin curlers, protruding at one side, her feet, in old pink satin slippers, at the other.

"Hello," she said, without getting up or putting aside the newspaper she was reading. "What brings you? We're resting. But sit down. Chuck the bag off that chair, Aunt Emily."

The room was like a deep box with windows set so high that, in a corner, there was a pole with a hook to open them. Miss Susan felt sure it was never used. The room smelled of new carpet, a harsh ochre; everything was new, varnished, and in the Miss Tophams' opinion, hideous. On a stand was an art vase of honesty, its delicious parchment interspersed with coloured tinsel balls to brighten it up. Gwen lolled on the sofa, her feet so high she showed her knickers. The Miss Tophams averted their eyes.

"Well, what have you come for, ducks?" said Gwen, scratching her arms. "Not for love of me, I'm sure. Something wrong with the precious boy? You're not going to say he can't play to-night, I hope?"

"We don't want him to play here at all," said Miss Emily.

"We understand that he can't leave you in the lurch at once, but at the end of the week we want you to tell him you don't need him any more."

"And can you see me doing it?" asked Gwen. "I would be a fool. He's a draw, is Philip, and he knows it. He's having the time of his life. You came here and saw him, you made no objection. What's got you now?"

"It's not good for him," said Emily. "It's affecting his health. He can't play night after night, in a bad atmosphere, after his day's work at Fell and Brownings."

"Let him give up the day work then," interrupted Gwen. "He'll get twice as much here in time."

"We would never agree to that," said Miss Emily sternly. "It's not the sort of life we want for him."

"It won't matter much what you want," said Gwen. "Phil takes after his father. You'll not root his playing out of him. If he doesn't play here, he'll play somewhere else. I should have thought you'd have thanked me for keeping him under your eye, instead of carrying on like this. Phil'll go his own way. I always went mine, didn't I, in spite of you? Well, Phil's my son, though I dare say you'd like to forget it. You know, you two," said Gwen, drawing in her feet, raising her knees and showing even more of her knickers, "I dare say you've been very good and you meant well and all that, but your sort shouldn't really mix itself up with ours. Your life drives us bats, you know. A bit of reading and playing the piano, but nothing loud, oh no, and nothing with a tune to it. A bit of gardening and going to church—and what else? Nothing. How d'you expect anybody with guts to stand it? I couldn't, and I bet Phil doesn't, either." She looked at them with her bright, mocking eyes.

"Philip was happy until you came," said Miss Emily, her lips trembling. She was struck to the heart by Gwen's version of life at The Willows in case it was at the root of the trouble, in case it was what was driving Philip to his

wild ways. Parsons' sons, boys brought up by maiden aunts, always went wild in reaction.

But Susan drew herself up in the hideous plush armchair. She was extremely indignant that the raddled Rubens on the sofa should attack Emily in this way—Emily, so gentle, unselfish, good, tolerant—far too tolerant. That was where the trouble was. Emily, she herself, they had both been far too tolerant.

"Gwen, you're a viper," she said. "We nursed you in our bosom far too long. After the first half-dozen bites we should have thrown you out. I don't like gratitude and we never wanted any. Which is a good thing, because we should never have got any from you. But you haven't even any decent feeling. You've treated us abominably. You've cheated and lied since the day you came to the house. Your latest trick has been to get three thousand pounds out of us under false pretences, and you use it to undermine our influence with Philip and our hopes of a good life for him."

"Phil's as keen on this dance-hall as we are," said Gwen, her curlers clashing.

"The fact remains that but for you he would never have thought of it," said Susan. "You came back to get what you could out of us, you introduced him to a life he would never have known but for you. You can make out a case for your sort of life against ours, if you like, but under your eyes at this moment is a proof which life is the better. Look at my sister's face and look at your own, twenty years younger and more though you are. My sister's life shows in her face and yours shows in yours, and a vulgar, self-indulgent, low thing it is . . ."

"Susan!" cried Miss Emily amazed.

"I don't care," said Susan. "It's time we spoke out. It's no use sparing her feelings. She hasn't got the feelings we're soft enough to credit her with. She's a bad influence. She's dogged our lives for twenty-five years, turning up

again and again to see what more she could get out of us. I know you'd never have said this, Emily, so I've said it for you. And now come away. I'll speak to Philip myself."

She got up from the plush chair, and Emily got up too.

"Well, thanks a lot," said Gwen. "Now I know where we stand. But I bet Phil won't listen to you. You'd better tackle that girl, that Sonia Smith they're both after," she said, narrowing her eyes at them as if she were glad to give them something else to worry about. "Phil'll go where that girl is, and she's always here. I don't suppose you knew about her, did you? There's a lot more danger in a girl like Sonia Smith than there is in any piano-playing. And there's danger in men themselves, it's *in* them," said Gwen. "So what are you going to do about that?"

The Miss Tophams had halted at the door. A girl. This was a new threat to Philip. They looked almost blankly at Gwen, unable to deal with it. Susan recovered first. "Go along, Emily," she said, gently impelling her sister through the door. "It's no good looking to her. She can't tell us what to do."

"Well, ta-ta," said Gwen, resuming the paper.

They shut the door and went carefully down the stairs, much shaken.

II

Susan had what she thought of as a "talk with Philip," though the talking was all on her side. He listened, half-smiling in affection, but looking as if she didn't really know what she was talking about. And facing him, she almost felt she didn't. It was all very well to talk, to point out, but you couldn't do away with the blind drive of youthful passion. Parents might go about congratulating themselves that because they have explained the "facts of life" in good time their children can't possibly come to any harm. But facts have little or no effect on feelings; you can't reason with passion.

Philip listened, assured her that there was nothing to worry about, patted her on the shoulder and went on as before. The only difference was that Ronald did not come to the house. There was no more noise upstairs; but that only made things seem ominously quiet. The Miss Tophams were soon inconsistent enough, as they acknowledged to each other, to wish that Ronald would come back and things be as they were.

Philip was increasingly tired, strained, silent, and the Miss Tophams, remembering their last experience of adolescent love, were haunted by the idea that like his mother he would run away. They got into the habit of not being able to go to sleep until they heard him come in at night.

Gradually they gave up the idea of going to bed at all until he came in. They wandered in and out of each other's rooms, and about midnight Emily made tea with her electric kettle. If he was very late, she made it again during the night. They wore silk caps with deep lace frills and dressing-gowns of quilted silk, Susan's crimson, Emily's peacock blue. The gowns were old and the stuffing was coming out in places, and Cook had lately turned the cuffs and collars to make them do a little longer. The Miss Tophams were cutting down their personal expenses.

They had learnt with mild surprise that if you reduce your capital you reduce your income. Gwen's three thousand pounds had taken a large slice of their remaining capital, already considerably eaten into by the cost of Philip's upbringing and education. The sisters had always lived with comfort and elegance and had never thought of doing otherwise, but lately it had been brought home to them that they must make some economies. It would be dreadful if it came about that they had to leave their beloved Willows, they said to each other. Only one more raid must be made on their capital, they agreed, and that was for Philip's car on his birthday which was only two months away now. After that, positively nothing more must be

taken out, for it was not only themselves they had to think about, but Philip and Cook too.

So they waited up for Philip in dressing-gowns they would once never have dreamed of wearing. They made tea, they talked a little and sighed a good deal without knowing it. Each sometimes noticed that the other sighed and was compassionate, without noticing that she sighed herself.

"He gets later and later," sighed Emily.

"I think he'd been drinking last night," said Susan.

"I feel we've failed as foster parents," said Emily.

"It's only what many a real parent has to put up with," said Susan. "Why should we escape?"

Cook sometimes came in, her hair screwed into knobs with lead curlers, to remonstrate with them, or have a cup of tea herself. She often told Philip what she thought of him keeping his aunts up night after night, distressing them, wearing them out. But he said they had no need to wait up for him; he hated them to wait up for him, he said, it was their own fault. He spoke savagely sometimes, shocking Cook into silence.

One night, a mild summer night with a fine rain falling, the Miss Tophams wandered about the landings as usual. From time to time Susan looked through the thick curtains by way of something to do. The moon showed through a slit in the clouds like an eye through a half-closed lid.

At midnight Emily made tea; at half-past one she made it again. As she was drinking hers, Susan paused to listen. She had heard a quick padding of footsteps on the gravel.

"He's coming," she said to Emily, thankful that their long vigil was over. They heard his key in the lock, the front door was stealthily opened and closed.

"He's not been drinking to-night," said Susan. "He's trying to be quiet."

"We can go to bed now," she said, kissing her sister. "Good night, dear." She went to the door to steal to her own room. They didn't like Philip to know they waited up for

him, it annoyed him. She stood with the door in her hand, wondering if it were safe to slip across the landing now, or if it would be better to wait until he had come up and shut himself into his room.

But as she stood, a strange sound made itself heard in the silence of the night. The sisters turned their startled eyes to each other. It was the sound of very fast, very difficult breathing. It was the noise of sobbing, straining lungs, struggling for breath in the hall below.

Without a word the sisters were through the door and on to the landing. Emily switched on the light, Susan was already half-way down the stairs. Beyond the threshold of the dining-room, the darkness behind him, stood Philip, his collar burst from his neck, his soaked clothes hanging on his body, his hair streaked over his brow. His staring eyes upon them, he struggled to breathe, his chest heaving.

"Philip!" they cried. Miss Emily made to turn on the dining-room light, but he raised an arm as if it were a dead weight and shook his head.

"No light," he gasped.

"Philip, what on earth is the matter? Where have you been? What is it?"

Miss Emily grasped him firmly by both shoulders. He staggered in her hands.

"The light, Susan," she said.

"No, no," he said hoarsely. "No one must see . . ."

"No one can see through those curtains," said Miss Emily sternly.

The light on, the Miss Tophams stared at him in horror. Blenched, distraught, shuddering, he stared at them with fixed eyes.

"I've killed them both," he said, hanging between Emily's hands. "They're both dead, and another man in the road . . . they're dead, all three . . ."

"Philip, pull yourself together . . . you're drunk . . ."

"No, I wish I was. . . . They're dead, I tell you. I

didn't see the man in the road till the last minute. I ran up a bank to avoid him, the car overturned. Sonia and Ronald are dead, I felt their hearts . . . they've stopped. The man's dead too. And you see, I'm not touched. Oh, Aunt Emily," he said with a dry sob. "I was jealous of him, but I never wanted him to die—and I love her so much and I've killed her." He bowed his head and sobbed, while Miss Emily held him off, staring at him.

"It can't be true," faltered Susan, stooping to look closely into his face. "You've no car . . . what car . . . ?"

"Ronald took it from the car-park at the back of the hall. I saw him coming with Sonia. I stood in the road and made him stop. I forced my way into the driving-seat. We were all a bit tight, I think. He and Sonia climbed over into the back. I was mad because she did that. I drove all out on the Orton Road, and then I had the accident, and then I found they were dead. I left them lying there and I've run across the fields—it was near the White Posts."

"More than four miles out . . ." said Emily. "You've run four miles."

"I've never seen a soul," said Philip, as if he were pleading with her. "No one saw me. No one knows I was there. Don't let anyone know, Aunt Emily. I'll be had up for manslaughter and for taking a car that doesn't belong to me. I'll get years in prison. Hide me, Aunt Emily. No, no," he said, breaking away from her and throwing himself into a chair, leaning over the side distractedly, clasping his head, "I don't need hiding. I must just stop here and go on as usual. I mustn't hide. No one knows I was in that car . . . no one must ever know that I killed them."

At an exclamation from behind, the sisters turned. Cook came into the room, her face set.

"You're right," she said harshly. "Nobody must know. No need for anybody to know. What good can that do, now they're dead? You must go to bed. We must get

the lights out and the house quiet. But you must stop shivering. Stop chattering your teeth. Put your hand under his chin, Miss Emily. I'll get him some hot milk. Hot milk for shock, they say. We must think up a tale—of how he came home at the usual time and went to bed. Go over him, Miss Emily, and see he has no stains on his clothes. We must think of everything. Get his shoes off, Miss Susan, and bring them to me. I'll burn them. They'd give him away. We must think of everything," she said again, hurrying out to the kitchen.

Emily put one hand on his head and the other under his chin, her thoughts whirling. Susan knelt on the carpet and took off his thin burst shoes.

"Gwen knows, surely," she said. "She must know you went to the car . . ."

"She doesn't, she doesn't!" he said, rolling himself free from their hands in the chair. "He went out with Sonia hours before. I saw him go. I know where they were going. I had to play. I had to go on playing. I'll never play the piano again—never, never. It was torture—those damned tunes . . ."

He clasped his head.

"I wish I'd died. I wish I'd been killed too. I'll go to prison. I'll be years in prison. It's manslaughter. I'll never forget I've killed them. I'll be shut up for years with nothing to think of but that I killed them."

"Philip, Philip," said Susan, trying to stroke his hands.

"She was eighteen," said Philip. "Her neck's broken. She must have hit the roof of the car."

"Philip, stop. Don't go on like this. They'll never get you. No one will ever know," said Emily. "Try to stop shivering, darling. Susan, do you think he ought to have brandy?"

"No," said Susan. "He needs a sedative, not a stimulant. I'll go and get those tablets from my room."

She went out. Philip lay back in the chair, his eyes closed,

his face streaked with sweat and rain. Emily stood beside him, looking at him. The whole thing was a nightmare she could not credit. His face was a nightmare. That he should ever look like this, that he should ever suffer such remorse and fear . . .

Susan came back with the tablets. She stood with her sister, looking at him too. His face frightened her. There was some struggle going on in him that they dared not break in on. When Cook came in with the hot milk, Susan put out a hand to keep it aside.

Philip opened his eyes and looked at them as if they were not there. He sat up and leaned forward in the chair, his chin in his hands, his elbows on his knees. He had finished shivering ; he sat still and silent, staring blindly before him, and the three women stood round him, silent too.

The clock in the hall ticked audibly ; ponderous, slow. The women waited, not knowing what they waited for.

Suddenly Philip bent forward and seized the shoes Susan had taken off. He began to put them on, his fingers sure and quick on the laces.

"Philip," said Miss Emily. "What are you doing?"

He did not answer until his shoes were on. When he spoke it was in a different voice, resolute, almost calm. He got to his feet and fastened his collar.

"I'm going to give myself up," he said.

They stared at him, petrified.

"Philip," cried Susan, darting to pinion him in her arms. "You mustn't. No one saw you, no one need ever know, what good can it do—since they're dead? You're not going. You're mad."

Gently, almost smiling, he tried to free himself. "I was mad when I ran away," he said. "I've come to my senses now."

"Not you, you're crazy," rasped Cook. "Clean crazy. You'll ruin yourself. You'll never live it down. You'll go to jail for two years or more. You at your age, just begin-

ning your life. And what about your aunts? You'll kill them. Nice reward this, for all they've done for you. And what will it cost them trying to get you off? They'll spend their last penny. You and your mother between you, you've taken pretty near all they had. The only thing you can do now for your aunts is to swear you've never been in that car, and stick to it. If we're prepared to lie, you've got to lie too."

Philip shook his head. "It's no good. I've got to go. If I don't I'll never have any peace again. Sonia and Ronald are dead, I'm sure of that. But that man in the road may not be. I don't know now. I can't remember what I did when I found the other two were dead. That man at the car-park, I must let it be known that he wasn't there when Ronald took the car. He'd let Ronald sit in the car before, but he never thought he'd take it away. He'd lose his job and never get another . . . there are too many things involved, all sorts of things will come out. I must go. It's no good," he said grimly. "I must face it. If I'm going to keep a shred of self-respect, I must face it."

"Philip," wept Susan. "For our sakes, don't go. We're old, Philip, we can't stand it. We'd never live to see you come out of prison."

He put his arms round her.

"I'm so sorry . . . I'm so terribly sorry, Aunt Susan. I wish you'd never kept me when I was born. See what I've brought on you. But I've got to go. Aunt Emily," he said, looking to her, his arms round Susan. "You see that I've got to go, don't you?"

Emily stood with the tears running down her face.

"Yes, dear, I see. So go, my dear, dear boy, and God bless you."

A look of relief came into his face.

"I'm going on my motor-bike. I'm going to the police station in Carden Street, it's the nearest. I shall take them to the place," he said, catching his breath. "I'll get a

message through to you as soon as I can. I don't know what they do. Perhaps they'll let me out on bail. I wish you'd go to bed now, all of you. Try to get some sleep. Try not to worry."

He kissed the weeping Susan, he kissed Emily, who stood stiffly like a post, he kissed Cook, who sobbingly abused him: "You silly, silly boy . . . you young fool, breaking our hearts. You've no right to go . . . no right . . ."

The door closed behind him. They stood rooted. They heard him start his motor-cycle. They heard the sound of the engine diminishing down the road, they listened, their breath held, until they heard no more. Susan sank into a chair and wept. Cook, her hands pressed over her mouth, went out to the kitchen. Emily stood where she was, old, stricken, following him, suffering doubly, with him and for him.

They were ignorant of the law, all of them. He thought he was going to certain prison sentence, to condemnation of manslaughter; so did they.

The clock in the hall struck three; three heavy strokes. On the table stood the glass of milk, its surface wrinkling and shivering as if a chill went over it, as over them.

"His clothes are wet," wept Susan. "He's wet through. We let him go in his wet clothes."

Cook came into the dark hall and stood there, looking in at the dining-room. Miss Emily still stood like a statue under the lights.

"Sit down, love," said Cook, going in and guiding her to a chair. "Sit there. I'm going to get your rugs, you're both cold."

"Don't go, Cook," Susan besought her. "Stay with us. Stay here."

"I will, Miss Susan dear. I'll bring something for myself too. We brought him up together and we'll wait together. I dare say it will be a long wait."

It was a long wait. Time crawled, the fingers crawled

over the face of the dining-room clock. It was the thin hour when human life and hope is at its lowest ebb. Despair filled the three stricken women sitting in the dining-room. What was happening to him now, facing his ordeal on the deserted road, showing what he had done to his brother and the young girl? Those two poor young creatures, killed in their wild youth. . . . And that unknown man? They shuddered. They shuddered and prayed the hours away.

It was when daylight was showing greyly in the hall that Susan turned to Emily with a watery radiance in her face.

"I'm glad he didn't listen to me," she said. "I'm glad he went."

"Yes," said Emily, sighing. "We were afraid of what was happening to him, but he was put to the test and he chose the right. All our hope for him was fulfilled to-night, though it has been in such a terrible way. Whatever happens, I don't think we need ever fear for him again."

Cook gave a sob, but pressing her lips together she got up to draw back the curtains. The rain had stopped. The sun was rising, the birds were singing in the gardens.

The long night was over. They did not know it, but the worst was over too.

III

Wholly unlooked-for though it was, help began to come with the morning. During the night, they had seen none anywhere for Philip or themselves. The only light in the darkness was that he had overcome his own weakness and done what was right. They warmed themselves with that thought all the long night, but they did not hope for any relief from the terrible situation. They were so entirely ignorant of legal procedure that they expected only the inexorable closing in of the legal machinery on their boy. With him, they took the affair quite literally; he had killed three people and must suffer for it.

But even as they rose stiffly from their chairs and began to fold up the rugs they heard the sound of Philip's motor-cycle in the road. They knew it too well to be deceived. They stared at one another, the rugs falling from their hands. Regardless of worn dressing-gowns, lace caps and Cook's curlers, they hurried out into the drive, and stood, an odd group, with their eyes incredulously on the gate. He appeared. He brought the motor-cycle to a standstill at the door and almost fell from the seat. Their shaking, eager hands were quick to help him, to take him into the house. Miss Susan looked back, expecting a policeman to appear in custody ; but there was no one.

"They haven't arrested you," she said in astonishment.

"No," said Philip in a hoarse voice, his eyelids drooping from fatigue. "No arrest. They say it's an accident. But I killed them. They're dead. All of them are dead. The man in the road too."

"Come upstairs, dear," said Miss Emily. "Don't try to talk now."

They found unutterable relief in looking after him, getting a hot bath ready, getting his breakfast. Hot milk, not coffee, Susan decreed. He must sleep. To make sure he should, she crushed sedative tablets into the milk.

When they had done all they could, they drew the curtains and left him lying in his bed, his dark head turned away, one hand clenched at the length of his arm outside the covers. They felt their hearts breaking with love and pity, but they blinked back the tears and went downstairs to tell Cook that they thought he would sleep now.

"He's been to see Gwen already," they told her. "And the girl's mother too. He's facing up to everything, you see."

Cook had made tea for them, and they drank it at the kitchen table, their lips trembling so that the cup was unsteady against them.

"We must dress now," said Emily. "We must be ready to face the day."

Cook was already her usual trim figure in print, her crimped hair concealed under a starched cap. Her heart had almost broken in the night, but her hair had gone on crimping itself in the curlers. She had wondered vaguely, as she unwound it, how it dared come out like this, as if nothing had happened.

The Miss Tophams stole upstairs again. Quietly passing from bathroom to bedroom, quietly opening wardrobe doors, they dressed. But as Miss Emily stood at her dressing-table pinning on her jabot of fine lace, her nervous apprehension, calmed by Philip's return, leaped into violent activity again. She saw a policeman coming up the drive. She steadied herself against the table. It had been too good to be true, then? He was coming to arrest Philip. The dread Law had taken, among its inexplicable turns and twists, another turn.

"Susan," she said, appearing at her sister's door. "A policeman is here."

Susan turned and put her hand, too, to her heart.

"A policeman! Emily—don't faint. Sit on the bed. See, I'll get you the sal volatile. Hold up, dear. See, this is nearly ready."

But as she put the glass into her sister's hand, Cook came up the stairs and into the room, her face all smiles and tears.

"Oh, Miss Emily," she said. "It's Tom Holt. He said I was to say that. It seems you got his father a job a long time ago when he'd been out of work for months, and Tom—a very well-set-up-fellow," said Cook, garrulous with relief. "He was in the station last night when Philip went in, and he's heard something that'll relieve your mind since Philip left the station, so he's come round to tell you on his way home, because he knew you'd be in great trouble to-day."

"Oh, Cook," breathed Miss Emily. "God is so good. I thought they'd come to take Philip away."

They hurried down the stairs, and there in the kitchen was Tom Holt, large, healthy, reassuring, kind—the Law on their side, not against them.

“Good morning, Miss,” he said. “You don’t remember me, of course, seeing I was only a little shaver when you used to come to our house in Sale Street. You got my father a job as water-meter inspector, you remember?”

“Oh, you’re Fred Holt’s son,” said Miss Emily, taking his hand. “Your father was such a nice man. I only went to see the Water Engineer once or twice; he got the job himself.”

“No, it was you told him about it. He’d never have thought of it, or thought he could get it, Miss, but you encouraged him and gave him confidence at a time when he’d lost it. He spoke about you many and many a time. In fact, that much, that we grew up thinking we owed about everything we’d got to you.”

“Sit down, Tom Holt, do please sit down,” said Emily. “See, Cook’s bringing you a cup of coffee. Cook says you’ve some good news for us, even on this awful day.”

“Well, it’s like this, Miss,” said Tom Holt, sitting down and putting his peaked hat on the table. “I don’t know as I really ought to divulge it, but I just got to know, when I was going off home to my breakfast, that that man in the road had been dead for several hours before your boy had his accident. It was a dead body in the road, Miss—perhaps more’s the pity he tried to avoid it, because if he’d run over it the two young ’uns might have been alive now. But it makes one less he has to blame himself for, doesn’t it? Yes, the man had been killed by something heavier than a car—probably a lorry—several hours previous.”

“Oh, Tom, bless you for coming to tell us,” said Miss Emily, sinking into the chair Cook put for her. “Bless you for your kindness. If I ever did anything for your father you’ve more than repaid me now,” she said, wiping her eyes.

“But the other two. He’ll be judged for manslaughter,

won't he?" said Susan, leaning forward to look into Tom Holt's face as if the answer to every legal question could be found there.

"No, no, Miss," he said, throwing back his head in protest against such an idea. "Not manslaughter. It was an accident. A dreadful accident, I know, and one that he'll never forget, judging by the way he's taken it. But it wasn't even negligent driving. He tried to avoid a man lying in the road—drunk, probably he thought—the road was wet, he skidded and ran up a bank. That's an accident."

"But he'll be committed to the Assizes at the inquest, won't he?" asked Susan.

"I don't think so for a minute," said Tom Holt. They stared at him incredulously. "Mind you, all this is going to cost you a pretty penny. It wasn't him that took that car in the first place; somebody's come forward already and said they saw that other young chap come out of the car-park with it. My hat," said Tom with feeling. "I wouldn't like to be that chap at the car-park! Well, as I was saying, your young man didn't take it, but he was driving it, and seeing he's only got a motor-cycle licence he's not insured against car accident. You'll have to pay for that car, and it's a Rolls. Might cost you anything up to two thousand pounds, and I dare say the parents of the girl will try to get compensation out of you. Yes, last night's work will cost you a lot of money, I'm afraid."

"Eh, dear," said Cook with a heavy sigh. She knew how much money had gone already, one way and another.

But the Miss Tophams were not only undismayed, they were radiant. If only Philip could be saved from a charge of manslaughter, from the agonizing wait for trial, from a prison sentence, they would pour out every penny they had and think nothing of it. The house could go—and probably would in any case, now—everything could go.

"Oh, the relief it is to hear you say these things, Tom," said Miss Emily, wiping her eyes again.

"What you want to do," counselled Tom Holt, picking up his hat, pulling down his tunic and preparing to go home to breakfast, "is to get on to your own lawyer right away. I've only given you my opinion for what it's worth, but that's the way I think it will come out!"

He was right. That was precisely the way it came out. But there was much that was painful to be gone through first.

That afternoon the Miss Tophams, though by this time exhausted with fatigue, age, the effects of shock, went to see Gwen. They shrank from the visit, they would have given anything not to go, they confessed to each other, but it must be done. If their boy could face it, they could, and it had been so very much worse for him, they said to each other as they climbed the stairs to the flat door.

Ken admitted them. He did not look at them any more openly than he had ever done, but they saw his grief. He had loved and admired his son, who was endowed with all the dash and courage he himself had never had. Ronald did shady things without a vestige of shadiness, which is how his father would have liked to do them. He did wrong openly and cheerfully, above all cheerfully. He hadn't given a damn for anything, and he had been the pride of his father's heart. His death had shattered Ken.

Preceding Ken down the dark passage was like going through a tunnel with Gwen looming, in the lighter sitting-room, at the end of it. She sat on a small chair in a short tight skirt, her feet planted apart, one hand doubled into a menacing fist on one knee, the other holding a glass of whisky on the other. She looked awful, and the Miss Tophams were appalled.

She received their expressions of sorrow and sympathy with a snarl.

"Oh, cut it out. It's done, isn't it? You won't bring him back. Twenty—and dead. A smart boy like that . . . could have done anything. Laughing here at this time

yesterday, drinking out of that bottle of whisky with us, as a matter of fact. And he's dead now. Here, Ken," she said, holding out her glass, "give me another drink. And don't you look at me like that, you," she said, thrusting her chin out at the Miss Tophams. "I shall drink if I like. What can you do but drink when things like this get you? I got blind when Bern died. Absolutely blind. Or I'd have thrown myself over Brooklyn Bridge. And I'll drink now until I forget what I saw at the mortuary to-day. So you'd better go. Go away, you only upset me," she said, turning her back on them. "Show them out, Ken. I'd rather be left."

But the Miss Tophams stood there, murmuring, full of pity and helplessness.

"Ken, pull that bloody blind up," shouted Gwen, waving her glass to the high window where a white linen blind diffused the strong sunlight without keeping it out. "He will have it down, God knows what for. No one can see," she hissed at him. "The body's not here. You're superstitious, that's what you are. Pull it up, or I'll tear it down."

Ken passed noiselessly to the wall and pulled at the long cord. The blind went up. His son was dead and there was nothing to show it. The world went on just the same; traffic pouring down the street, the bread arriving, the meat, the milk, the hall would open to-night as usual, the partner wouldn't agree to closing it down, all the young people would crowd in, those tunes would pound out till midnight—all, all as usual. But Ron would not be there. He was amazed, wounded, that everything should go on in the same way, with no sign. So he drew the blind. It was the only thing he had been able to do to mark the difference of this day, and somehow it meant something to him. And now Gwen made him pull it up.

The rasp of her voice worked on his nerves like a saw. She had chivvied him all day, do this, do that, go there, come here . . . as if she were the only one who suffered, who

mattered. To be left alone with Gwen, without Ronnie, who had made everything tolerable. . . . Ken put his hand over his mouth in a distracted gesture. But she was telling him to do something else. He took his hand away to give her his attention, his eyes wild.

"Show them out, for God's sake, Ken. Tell them to go, or I'll scream."

"Better go," he murmured, motioning them to the passage.

"You'll have to pay for that car," Gwen shouted after them as they reached the stairs. "It's your responsibility. Philip was driving. Oh, shut the door, Ken, and come in, for God's sake."

And as the Miss Tophams went out into the streets, the posters were out round the doorways of small stationers' shops, and the newsboys calling: "Fatal Joy-ride." "Midnight Accident. Two Dead." "Adopted Son Wrecks Borrowed Rolls."

"'Adopted Son,'" said Susan in bitter disgust. "What's that got to do with it?"

"My dear," said Emily, taking her sister's arm as much to get as to give comfort and support, "this is only the beginning of a great deal of disagreeable publicity, so we might as well face it."

Shaken from their visit to Gwen, straining to escape from the scream of posters and the interested or compassionate glances that seemed to meet them wherever they looked, the Miss Tophams reached home with relief, only to be met by Cook in the hall with the news that James was in the drawing-room.

"Our bird of ill-omen," sighed Susan. "Let there be trouble and James comes to gloat and say 'I told you so.'"

This time she misjudged her brother. When the family lawyer telephoned to him in the morning, James had taken it as a matter of course that he should come at once to his sisters' help. In these cases blood is usually thicker than

water, and James had set off with a genuine desire to support. But so strong was habit that, when Emily and Susan came into the room, instead of coming forward with sympathy as he had intended, James rose from the sofa with an accusing expression and said: "This is a nice how-d'you-do, I must say."

"There's no must about it," said Emily wearily. "But I'm sure you will." Last straw though he seemed, she went to kiss him. "Have you had tea?"

"No, I told Cook I'd wait for you."

The Miss Tophams were sorry. They had hoped to be able to gain the refuge of their own rooms, but now they had to sit with him.

"Well," said James, beginning again, "I once read somewhere that 'Every Good Deed Brings its Evil Return,' and by Jove, it's true."

Cook turned from putting down the tray and stared stonily at him.

"If you're referring to our adoption of Philip as a good deed, James, though the good has come to us, since he's brought us happiness we should never otherwise have known," said Susan stiffly, "I prefer 'Cast thy bread upon the waters and it shall return to thee after many days.'"

"Gone pretty mouldy in this case," said James.

"You know nothing about it," said Emily. "But you can take our word for it that Philip has justified all our faith in him by his behaviour in this terrible affair."

"He's coming downstairs," warned Cook, going out.

Philip came into the room. He went straight to his aunts, inclining his head to James in passing.

"I've been asleep far too long," he said. "Have you had to see anybody for me? Has anybody been?"

Susan drew him down into a chair beside her, and Emily hastened to pour out tea for him.

"Nobody's been but Tom Holt, a friend of mine, a

policeman, who came to tell us that the man in the road had been dead for hours. You didn't kill him."

Philip put his hands over his face. "Then I needn't have tried to avoid him. I killed the other two to save a dead man."

"Drink your tea, dear," urged Susan helplessly.

James moved restlessly on the sofa.

"You'd better pull yourself together, young man," he said. "Newton's waiting at his office. I called to see him on my way up and arranged to have you down there before five."

The Miss Tophams turned in sharp interrogation.

"The inquest is on Friday," said James, and at that they shrank. They looked stricken, as if everything were suddenly too much for them.

Philip stood up. "I'm ready," he said.

"But he's had nothing to eat all day," protested Susan.

"Can't help that," said James. "Newton can't wait."

His sisters looked at him. They deeply disliked James in this hectoring mood.

"I'm not hungry," said Philip. "I'll drink this tea."

He smiled to reassure them, and followed James from the room.

James had looked forward for a long time to telling this young man what he thought of him. He had relished the idea of making it plain what disaster, financial and otherwise, he and his mother had brought upon the innocent and benevolent sisters. With the aid of the family lawyer, he set about doing it at last, showing the boy that not only had he disgraced the family name which, said James, they had been rash enough to give him, but that the cost of this accident would complete the near ruin of the Miss Tophams' affairs. The home they loved and had lived in from childhood, said James, piling it on, must be sold. The Miss Tophams must move out, they must deprive themselves of the comfort they had always been used to at an age when

they most needed it. In future they must exercise the strictest economy. It was when James reached this point in his planned exposition that he realized to his dismay that he wasn't enjoying himself.

The boy sat, white and strained, his eyes fixed steadily on James's face, driven deeper and deeper into distress, but uttering no word in self-defence.

James had not reckoned with the fact that most people when faced with genuine suffering are sorry for the sufferer. James found himself invaded by wholly unexpected compunctious visitings of nature. He felt he was taking part in the baiting of an already wounded young creature, who took revilement with such touching acceptance and dignity that James was compelled into admiration, also reluctant. He was bound to admit, though only to himself, that the boy had something in him after all. That perhaps he had been, after all, worth saving.

James transferred himself from the offensive to the defensive side, thereby much puzzling Mr. Newton, who began to feel James was as incalculable as his sisters. When he called in the afternoon, the man had been in a towering rage, and here he was, in the evening, laying a hand on the boy's shoulder and saying he must take him home to get something to eat.

"He's had nothing to eat all day," said James, unconsciously echoing Susan.

All the same, when he got back to The Willows, James was careful to disguise the mollification of his feelings. It was not befitting to his dignity, he considered, to show such a complete, and to his sisters gratifying, change of front. It wasn't difficult to keep it from them. They were so taken up with looking after Philip that they did not concern themselves with James.

The next morning, Thursday, the Miss Tophams and James, coming down to breakfast, were astonished to find Philip leaving the house.

"Where are you going, dear?" asked Miss Emily.

"To work," said Philip, turning at the front door.

"Oh, I'm sure they'll excuse you to-day," said Emily.

"They won't expect you. Not before the inquest."

"I must go," said Philip.

He was in a fever to get to Fell and Brownings, to make sure of the job that meant so much to him now and of which he had hitherto been so careless. He must work hard now and try to keep the house together. He had depended on his aunts long enough; now they should depend upon him. He would work with all his might for them.

But in half an hour he was back at the house. He had been paid off. His work had never been satisfactory, they said. He had never applied himself, and now this disgraceful affair was the last straw. They had no room for playboys of his sort.

"Never mind, dear," said his aunts. "You never liked the work. Something better will turn up. Don't worry."

But to Philip it was a bad blow. During the long night, the only way he had been able to fight off the nightmare memory of his dead brother and the girl, the only hope he had been able to fasten on after last night's disclosures at the lawyer's office, the only factor that could be used to redeem the rest had been his determination to work as he had never worked before, to save the situation for his aunts. And now the chance was gone.

James alone knew what he felt and why, and James was very uneasy about his part in the boy's despair. He felt he had hit Philip when he was down, and was ashamed. And once more he was compelled to admiration. The boy, though obviously strained almost beyond bearing, kept with his aunts, trying to help them through the long day. James, in his turn, hung helplessly about Philip, trying to help Philip through.

"Play something, Aunt Susan," urged Philip from time to time, and Susan played. And though he had vowed he

would never touch the piano again, when Susan asked him to play, Philip took her place without demur. He would do anything they asked.

So he played. Not jazz or swing ; for the time being he was sickened of that. He played what he knew they liked best, pouring balm over their jangled nerves and apprehensions. James, laved in lovely sound, felt sadly that he had not had half enough music in his life. Doreen used to play to him, but she was far away in India now with her husband, and when she had gone his wife got rid of the piano because, she said, it took up too much room. His sisters had been wise in one thing, at any rate ; they had held to music and taught this boy to do the same.

"Isn't it wonderful," said Susan dreamily, "that however bad things are, there's always music."

Cook, busy in the kitchen with the door open—she said the time went better when she worked—listened to Philip's playing and kept putting up petitions for him : "Please God, let it be all right to-morrow. I know they say it's going to be, but please make sure of it."

At the inquest next morning everything happened as Tom Holt had said, except for one unforeseen incident. Miss Emily brought the Coroner's peroration to a close. As he was lashing unmercifully at great length at Philip, Miss Emily, unable to bear it any longer, called out : "He knows. He feels it all." The Coroner was so taken aback by the interruption that he could not, or at any rate did not, pick up the thread of his discourse again, and the inquest came sooner to an end.

But Philip's ordeal was not over. When he said he was going straight on to the funeral of his brother and the girl, his aunts were aghast. The town was buzzing with the sensation of the double funeral of the young victims. There was no need for Philip to expose himself to the morbid curiosity of the crowds. He mustn't go, they said. He had been under too long a strain already. They besought

him to let the affair end now, as he was certainly entitled to do.

"You'll not move him," said Cook. "He's punishing himself. He feels he ought to pay for being alive when they're dead."

James too tried to dissuade Philip, but when he found he could not, he electrified his sisters by going with him. That the fastidious James should submit himself to the proximity of Gwen and Ken and the excited crowds was almost as much a moral victory for James as the determination to be with his mother was for Philip.

James and Philip left the house together, and the Miss Tophams and Cook stayed at home to suffer for their boy, seeing in imagination his white face above the tossing crowds.

At last he came back with James, and they were able to close the door on the dreadful day. At last they were able to make him eat and go to bed, and at last they were able to go to bed themselves.

"But somehow," said Susan uneasily, as she kissed her sister good night, "it doesn't feel *over*, does it?"

"I'm afraid that's because Philip doesn't feel it's over," said Emily.

"It feels more as if there is something hanging over us still," said Susan. "But I don't know what it is."

"Perhaps we'll all feel better after a night's rest," comforted Emily.

They set the communicating door open between their rooms. Each, though neither said so, feared for the other after the events of the day. Each wanted to be within call of the other.

So that when Emily said quietly in the middle of the night: "Susan," Susan replied at once: "Yes, dear?"

"D'you hear James's voice?" asked Emily.

Susan listened.

"Yes, I think I do," said Susan, reaching for her dressing-gown and joining her sister.

"He sounds as if he doesn't want us to hear. He sounds as if he's trying to be quiet, though James never could, could he? Let's put out the light and open the door carefully."

They opened the door. Across the landing, in Philip's brilliantly lit room, was James, his grey hair in a cockatoo crest, his hand on Philip's shoulder. Emily gripped Susan's arm. Philip had his overcoat on and there was a suitcase at his feet. He had very obviously been on the point of running away. Susan made as if to dart forward, but Emily kept her back.

"You musn't go," said James, in what he meant for a whisper. "You'll break their hearts."

Philip tried to remove James's hand. "They'll be better without me. If I clear out, *you*'ll do something for them, sir. You won't if I'm here, and no wonder. . . ."

"Oh, yes I will," said James, forgetting to whisper. "I've been thinking about it all day. This house has to go, they know that. You'll all be better away from the town now. I shall propose that you all come to live in London. I need someone to follow me at the works and if it's one of the family, so much the better. . . ."

Emily drew Susan into the room and closed the door.

"Susan, he said *one of the family*!"

"I can't believe my ears," said Susan. "To think that all this time James has been all right underneath and we've never suspected it!"

"It's incredible," breathed Emily. "Poor James. I've said the most awful things to him at times."

"We'll go to London, won't we?" said Susan.

"We'll go anywhere where Philip can work and be happy. Cook won't object to London either. I'm rather nervous, though, about living near James's wife, Susan."

"London's a big place," said Susan. "Besides, I'm so happy about Philip's prospects that I'd put up with more than James's wife."

“And there’s another thing, dear,” said Emily. “I don’t think Gwen will dare to pester us with James at hand.”

“You don’t think Philip will run away now, do you?” asked Susan anxiously.

Emily shook her head. In their worn gowns and lace-frilled caps they went to the door again, turned out the light and looked across the landing.

Philip had taken off his coat and jacket and was preparing to take off his collar and tie. He looked different already; he was smiling at James, and James was smiling at him.

Emily closed the door.

“Leave them to it,” she said. “James can tell us all about it in the morning.”

